They're Coming For You

O. Penn-Coughin

Scary Stories that SCREAM to be Read

Bloody Valentine Edition

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You Come Too Publishing
Smashwords Edition
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Introduction

The theme here is love. In some cases these stories have to do with the horrors of love, but mostly it just comes down to the love of horror.

Serving as a sampler of sorts, most of these tales appear in the first three volumes of my scary story series. A brand new one, *Such Sweet Sorrow*, is a little change of pace in the form of a *para-roma*. (The theme is love after all.) Closing out the collection is the short novel *Vampire Ghost: The Short Life and Many Deaths of Harry "Dead Baby" Wilson*. This one's a kind of otherworldy murder mystery.

If you like what you see, there's plenty more where that came from. Check out the growing *They're Coming For You: Scary Stories that Scream to be Read* series.

I wish you much love and much horror. Together and apart.

O. Penn-Coughin

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Such Sweet Sorrow

Roland Bartholomew didn't exist. It wasn't so much that the 15-year-old was unpopular in school as that he went utterly unnoticed. He had no friends and no enemies. To teachers he was just another name on the roll sheet. He floated through his days as if he simply wasn't there.

The only thing that gave Roland's life meaning was art. He loved to study art history and he loved to paint. He spent most of his free time hanging out at art galleries and museums.

One rainy November day Roland was strolling through an exhibit of Victorian art at the Portland Art Museum. He was pretty much bored out of his mind. Roland wasn't big on the style of romantic realism represented in the majority of the paintings. He was more into edgier artists like Magritte, Picasso, Munch, and Chagall.

"This is way too sappy," he said under his breath.

But just as Roland was about to make a quick exit, something caught his eye.

It was a work entitled *Romeo and Juliet* painted in 1884 by a Sir Frank Dicksee. The two young lovers in the painting were kissing while Romeo sat atop a balcony. A flowery green vine wrapped its way up a nearby marble column. The dawn sky and the red terracotta rooftops of northern Italy could be seen in the background. But it was Juliet, in her long nightgown and downy beauty, who drew Roland's attention.

She stabbed at his chest like a knife and all his loneliness came bleeding out.

"She's so—" Roland whispered, fighting the lump in his throat, "*beautiful*."

His heart immediately ached for her. He was filled with a kind of longing he had never known before.

Roland began spending more and more time at the museum, standing dumbstruck in front of the painting. Minutes and hours and days went by like this. During non-museum hours, he read and reread *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare.

Then one day while he was standing there gazing at his true love, something strange happened. Something strange and amazing.

For a second, he found himself *in* the painting, in Romeo's shoes, kissing Juliet. Pressing her close to him, smelling her perfect skin, tasting her sweet lips.

At first Roland, knees still shaking, wasn't sure what had happened. He was just grateful for the joy he had experienced and that his imagination had grown so strong.

Over the coming weeks, this scene was repeated several more times. Each kiss was sweeter and lasted longer than the last.

Roland began to live for these all too brief moments of bliss. Unable to compete, the real world drifted away. Imaginary or not, for the first time in his life Roland was happy. But time was running out. The exhibit was set to move on to another museum in another city.

Roland wasn't sure what to do. Following Juliet around the world was not realistic. While he might be able to sneak off to San Francisco—the exhibit's next stop—a few times, what would happen when she traveled to Asia or went back home to England? Stealing the painting wasn't in the cards either. This was real life and he was no Thomas Crown.

At first, he bought a poster of the painting and took it home, hoping to recreate the magic. He stared and stared, but it was no use. He couldn't duplicate the experience. It didn't work.

Next he tried to paint it himself. Since he had never painted something in this style, he held out little hope. But in the end he was surprised that it looked as good as it did. The background was almost a perfect reproduction of the original. But try as he might, Roland just couldn't capture Juliet's beauty and the tender passion of the kiss the way Dicksee had. And more importantly he couldn't transport himself inside his own painting the way he did with the one at the museum.

Then he had an idea.

Maybe if I concentrate hard enough I can stay in the painting not just for a few seconds, Roland thought*, but forever*.

On the last day before the exhibit was scheduled to move on to the next museum, Roland skipped school and spent the entire day in front of the painting. He pretended he was there on a field trip.

"The museum's closing, son," a security guard said after the sun had gone down.

"Farewell, farewell!" Roland whispered. "One kiss, and I'll descend."

"It's time to go," the man said, walking up from behind and putting his hand on Roland's shoulder.

A moment later the guard heard a girl screaming. It was a terrible, agonizing howl that shook the large room. The guard thought the sound had originated from the wall behind the painting. He took a few steps toward it.

"What was that?" he said.

When the security guard turned back around, Roland was gone.

Lost in the kiss, Roland suddenly felt something pull him from behind and he lost his balance. In an instant, he was falling back, head over heels, down toward the ground. The Verona sky above her, Juliet's beautiful and haunted face was the last thing he saw. He heard her scream. In vain, his hand reached up for her. A moment later he hit the ground, breaking his neck.

Everything went black.

The next morning the museum was in full-blown pandemonium. One of the paintings, valued at several million dollars, had been stolen.

It was *Romeo and Juliet*.

The authorities were baffled. The security cameras hadn't captured anything unusual. A teenage boy and a security guard were the last people seen near it. The only clear fact was that at some point during the night, the original had somehow been replaced with a blatant forgery.

But why would the thief or thieves bother to leave behind a fake that was so obviously different? While it was true that the new painting was quite similar to the original in most ways, it contained one glaring difference that could not go unnoticed: Romeo was missing. Juliet now stood on the balcony alone, looking down at something on the ground with an expression of grief-stricken horror.

Perhaps just as strange was the fact that tests later showed the oils and the canvas to be from the original period—*almost 130 years old*. And experts agreed that everything

about the painting suggested that it was in fact the work of Frank Dicksee, who had been dead for more than 80 years.

The original was never found. And Roland Bartholomew was never seen again.

Yo Mama's Right Here

The figure rose out of the water. The wet, black dress pressed in on her bony body. The tattered, black bonnet surrounded what had once been a face. Rotting, gray flesh with teeth and bone showing through. Empty, dark holes where the eyes used to be. Her hands reached out blindly for her dead child.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" she moaned. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

With a scream, Jacob Brown woke up from his nightmare.

"Jacob, what's wrong?" his wife Mary asked.

"Bad dream is all," Jacob said, wiping the sweat off his face. "Get back to sleep now."

Tomorrow they would be crossing the Green River. Jacob always had trouble sleeping before crossings. To get an early start in the morning, the wagon train had camped near the river. Jacob could hear the sound of the dark water that was waiting for them.

"I would sooner rastle a bear than tangle with them waters," he thought.

But Jacob knew that if the family was going to get to the green farmlands of Oregon, they were going to have to cross this river. They had crossed others, and there would be more ahead.

He got up, pulled his boots on, and walked down to the river. Dawn still felt hours away. The moon did little to brighten the water or Jacob's troubled mind. After a while he walked back to the wagons.

In the morning a tired Jacob hitched the oxen to the wagon and smiled when he saw his three young children running around. Things were always better in the morning.

"Git on up here, you rascals," he told them. "It's time to go."

In the distance, dark clouds colored the sky. But overhead it was blue as the first wagons began to cross the river.

One behind the other, the heavy wagons moved slowly through the water, each making it safely to the other side. Finally it was their turn.

"Yaw!" Jacob shouted to the oxen. "Do work!"

By now the sky above had turned much darker and the water had begun to rise. The river was moving faster than when the first wagons crossed.

At first Jacob thought it was just his tired mind playing tricks on him. He could barely hear it above the noise of the rushing water.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" it moaned softly. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

Jacob swallowed hard and continued to drive the team. The animals did their best, but to Jacob it felt like giant snails were pulling the wagon. The force of the water made it harder and harder to keep on course. It started to rain.

And then Jacob heard it again. She was closer and louder now, and Jacob had no doubt she was real.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" she called again. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

Through chattering teeth, Jacob urged the team forward.

"Y-y-y-yaw!" he ordered in a shaky voice. "G-g-g-git going!"

The minutes seemed like hours, but through the now-pouring rain Jacob could see the shore ahead getting closer. He almost smiled at the thought that they would make it.

And then it happened. It happened just like in his dream.

Something rose out of the water right in front of the oxen. The wet, black dress pressed in on her bony body. The tattered, black bonnet surrounded what had once been a

face. Rotting, gray flesh with teeth and bone showing through. Empty, dark holes where the eyes used to be. Hands reaching out blindly in front of her.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" she moaned loudly. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

Suddenly, as Jacob screamed, the wagon hit a submerged boulder and rose in the air. Then, as Mary and the children screamed, the wagon tipped over. Jacob fell into the water and was carried downriver.

The last thing he saw before disappearing forever under the cold, black water was the woman floating above the wagon.

"Baby, come to meeeeee. Yo mama's ri…"

[Now quickly shout: AAAAAAH!]

Crossing rivers along the Oregon Trail was dangerous. Hundreds of pioneers drowned trying to cross the Kansas, North Platte, and Columbia Rivers—among others. In 1850 alone, 37 people drowned attempting to cross the Green River in Wyoming.

All the Pretty Vampires

Vampires had taken over the world.

All the best-selling books were about vampires. All the top-rated TV shows were about vampires. All the biggest money-making movies were about vampires. All the beaches were deserted. Tans were out. Pale was in. All the kids wanted to look and dress like vampires.

Vampires were cool and *oh so pretty*. Everyone either thought of himself as a vampire or in love with one. It got to the point where vampires hardly even needed to bite anyone. They just fed off all the love. The whole world was under one big vampire spell.

The whole world except for Dr. Gordon "Gordo" Chubbs, that is.

Gordo was old school all the way. He grew up back in the day when you killed vampires because they were undead and evil. Vampires were ugly. Vampires were bad. They had to be staked. End of story.

Gordo worked day and night in his lab to come up with an antidote to this curse of the pretty vampires. After years and years of failure, he finally came up with the solution.

It was all about the mirrors. As everyone knew, vampires could not see their own reflection. But what if they could? That would change everything, Gordo concluded.

He came up with a serum that allowed vampires to see themselves. But he still had a problem. How would he get the bloodsuckers to take it? Most of them were too smart to knowingly bring about their own doom.

And then one day, it came to Gordo. He would put the serum in the water supply. Of course, vampires didn't drink water. But humans did. And vampires still occasionally feasted on humans. The cure would be transmitted through humans.

Vampires began to see what everyone else could: they were pretty. *Oh so pretty.* Some vampires had not seen themselves in centuries. It was all too much, too fast.

Vampires began standing in front of the mirror for hours and hours, hypnotized by their own undying prettiness. And it wasn't long before their heads started growing, expanding, stretching until—Kapow! Kaboom! Kasplash!—they exploded.

Dr. Gordon "Gordo" Chubbs had done it! He had found a way to stop the curse of the pretty vampires.

Of course, the head exploding thing didn't exactly kill the vampires. They just stumbled around without heads. But they were totally helpless and harmless. And they were ugly. A headless vampire loses its charm fast. Most of them walked around like this until the sun came up. And then, of course, they burned up. The few smart ones—and they had to be smart to have no head and still remember to stay out of the sun—the few smart ones who returned to their coffins by day died of malnutrition.

Meanwhile, the humans suddenly woke up from their long sleep.

"I can't believe I used to love these ugly, headless freaks," people would say.

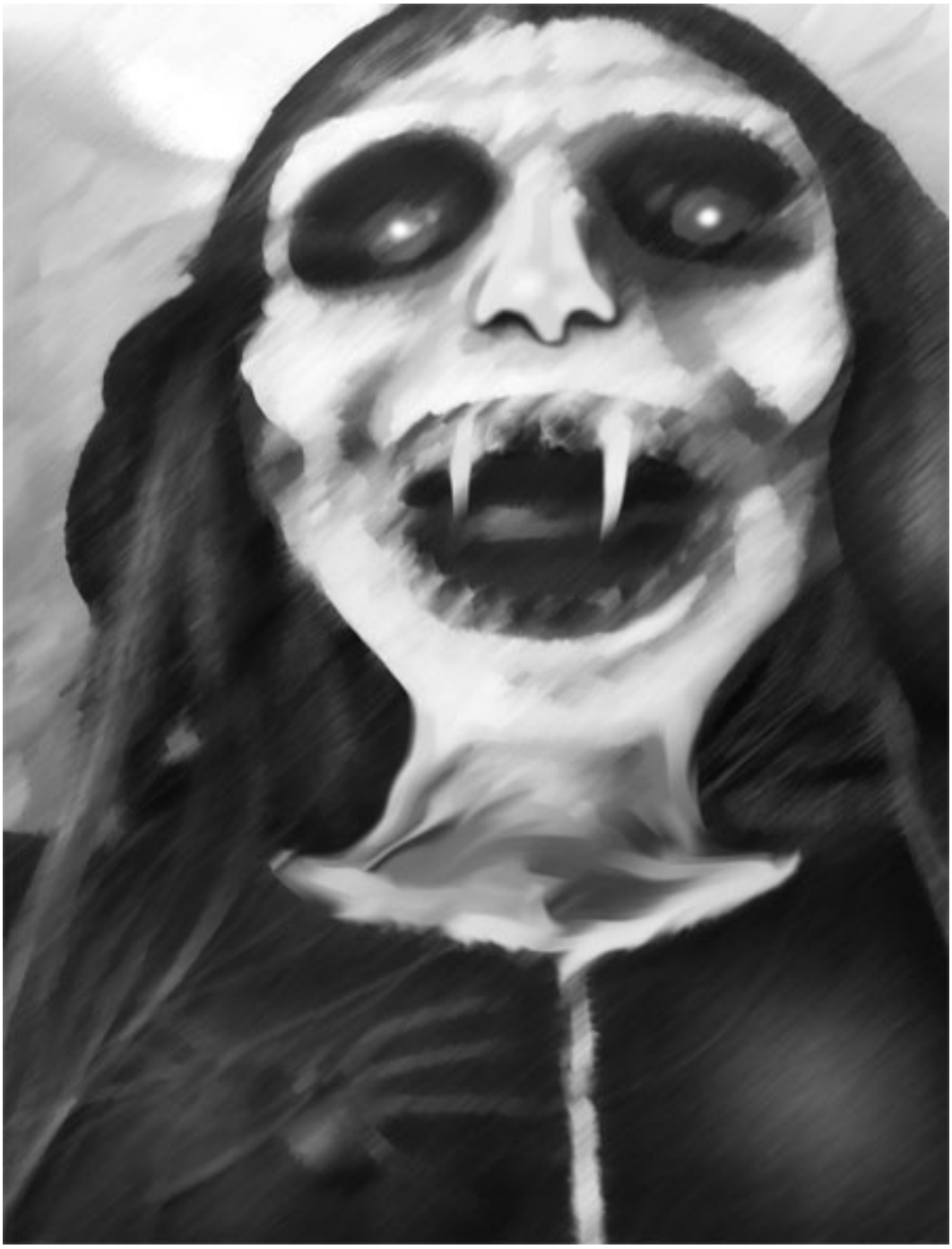
And then townspeople everywhere—doing what townspeople everywhere did best—got out their stakes and mallets and combed the countryside.

"Kill the freaks!" they shouted. "Kill 'em all!"

Suddenly finding themselves without heads, love, or sunscreen, the vampires began to disappear in record numbers.

Statues of Dr. Gordon "Gordo" Chubbs started going up all over the world. And in the ruins of a dark castle in Germany, seeing his chance, a long-forgotten, pieced-together monster started spending a lot of time in front of his mirror trying to figure out ways to become pretty.

"Fire, *bad,"* he would say, combing his hair. *"*Pretty*, good. Ummm,* pretty*, goooooood."*



The Girl Who Wouldn't
Marry Nuno Neves

"When Portuguese explorers first saw coconuts it reminded them of the *Coco*, which was their word for a sort of boogeyman-ish ghost or witch," the history professor said. "So you see, because of its brownish, hairy appearance, the coconut was actually named after the boogeyman."

Julia yawned loudly.

"This guy's killing me," she said under her breath.

After class, a student named Nuno came up to her. He always sat in the back, filling up notebooks with hearts and Julia's name.

"This class I like and me like you," he said and smiled. "One day me marry you."

"Get away from me, you creep," Julia said. "Do they just let anyone into this university? I would rather marry—what's his name?—the *Coco*."

Nuno became quiet and looked at the ground. Julia walked away.

A few weeks later the professor made an announcement at the end of class.

"I'm sorry to inform you that one of our students, Nuno Neves, has died. I don't have any other details," he said.

I wonder what happened to that creep, Julia thought and then shook her head. *Must have died from a broken heart.* She had to force herself not to laugh.

The next day a sickly sweet odor filled the old classroom. Julia knew right away what it was because she hated that smell. The room reeked of coconuts.

"Makes me hungry for some curry," the professor said. "And a piña colada."

As the days went by, the smell got stronger and stronger. It started to follow Julia everywhere she went and people even began to think that it was coming from her, that it was some new shampoo or perfume she was wearing. It was on her clothes, her hair, and her skin. And no matter how much she showered or did laundry, it only got stronger.

Julia sat alone in the corner of the cafeteria one afternoon. Suddenly she spit out her milk.

"This tastes like coconut!" she said, looking at the carton and seeing that it was just regular, plain milk.

Soon everything Julia ate tasted like coconuts. She stopped eating and going to her classes. She just stayed in her room day and night.

Weeks later, Julia found herself on a hospital bed. A dark fog covered the room. She thought she heard that song they played at weddings and felt herself being lifted off the bed. She looked down and saw that she was wearing a white dress.

Julia floated down a long hall lined by skeletons. When she stopped, Death stood in front of her with his hood and scythe. In the other hand he held a burning book.

"We are gathered here…" he began.

Julia was too weak to fight, too weak to run, too weak to scream.

"You look lovely, my dear," a ghastly voice whispered in her ear. "The ring, Nuno."

Julia turned behind her and saw Nuno Neves hold out a ring in his gray, dead hand. Horrible, hairy fingers reached out for it. And then for Julia.

She saw the ring slip onto her finger.

"You may now kiss the bride," Death said.

The tuxedoed figure to her side turned and pulled Julia in tight.

Before closing her eyes for the last time, Julia saw the thing with the hairy and hideous brown coconut head lick its lips and…

AAAAAAH!

Small Room

Perhaps it was the challenge of it. The young couple had never seen such an old house and they were intrigued by its mystery and character. It had dark wood floors that sucked all the light up, windows that were broken, and walls that were covered with peeling paint. It would be quite the job to fix it up, but they were excited and had a vision. And at such a great low price, how could they afford not to buy it?

They moved in and got to work. They decided to begin downstairs in the living room and dining room. Also, they would organize the small room at the end of the hall and make it into an office.

Two months later, the living room and dining room were finished and looked beautiful. The walls had been painted and bright new wood floors had been installed. They were very proud.

They decided to split up to make things go faster. Jane would finish the small room while Bob worked upstairs.

Bob had scraped off all the old paint in the master bedroom before he began to wonder how Jane was doing. It was odd that she wasn't playing any music like she usually did.

"How's it going down there?" Bob called out.

There was no answer.

"Jane?"

Still no answer. Bob went downstairs and walked to the small room. The door was closed. He tried to push it open, but something was in the way. That's when he realized that it was Jane.

"Jane!" he yelled.

He squeezed into the room, and found her lying unconscious on the floor. He grabbed her and gently slapped her face. When she came to, she couldn't remember what had happened.

"Did you hit your head on something? Are you okay? Did you fall off the chair?" Bob asked, Jane just shook her head.

"I don't remember anything," she said as he helped her walk over to the kitchen table. She sat down in a chair while he got her some water.

"I just remember that I was arranging boxes of books, and having a strange feeling, like somebody was watching me."

When Bob heard this, he made a thorough inspection of the house, checking all the rooms and doors. He checked their valuables. There was no evidence of a break-in. Bob didn't know what to make of it.

"I think we should stay out of that room," Jane said.

"You must have slipped off a chair and hit your head," he said.

"We shouldn't go in there anymore!" Jane said.

Bob thought about it for a moment. Jane wasn't thinking too clearly. They had just bought the house and now she wanted to close up this room forever.

"Let's do this. I'll finish up in there, and you work in our bedroom," he said.

At the end of the day, Bob met Jane upstairs.

"Did you finish?" she asked.

"Yes, it looks good," he said.

Jane didn't go in to see it. She wasn't ever going to go into that room again.

Over the next few days, Bob began to act strangely. He seemed grumpy and upset, even though he declared that nothing was wrong. Jane became worried. She had never seen this side of Bob and wondered if he had been working too hard on the house. He was mean, saying things that she thought he would never say. His eyes looked strange too and he never seemed to sleep or bathe anymore.

“Nag, nag, nag!” he yelled, after she asked him to change the light bulb in the bathroom. “I’ve married an annoying old hag!”

When they were painting the spare room upstairs, he seemed in an especially foul mood. Jane decided to work in the kitchen for a little while.

“Make me a sandwich while you’re down there!” he said in an angry voice. “I’m starving!”

“All right,” she said.

Jane thought about Bob as she made lunch. He sure had changed. Maybe it was just the pressure of fixing up this house.

Suddenly, she remembered the mortgage. She wasn’t sure if Bob had paid it. That would be terrible if they had forgotten. She had last seen the checkbook next to the computer in the office, right before she fainted.

She would have to ask Bob to go into the office and get it and she sure wasn’t looking forward to that. He would yell at her for sure. Just as she started heading upstairs, she put down the plate.

“I’m just going to get it myself,” she said out loud. “I’ll just have to be brave. Beats dealing with him.”

She crept down the long hallway and opened the door. A terrible odor rushed up, making her gag and almost vomit, like a rat had died in there. She flipped on the light. In the corner was Bob, dead—very dead—with flies buzzing around his rotting corpse. It looked like he had been there for a while.

“Oh, my God!” Jane whispered, backing out of the room. She started to let out a scream, but held her hand to her mouth.

“Where’s my freakin’ sandwich!” Bob suddenly yelled from *upstairs*. “Oh, never mind! I’ll be down there in a minute!”

La Arrugada

Oh, good you are awake, my friend. We were about to start without you. How are you feeling? What are you in here for? What is your name?

You are right, Miguel. My apologies. So many questions. Where are my manners? Dear me, I fear that was another question.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Diego Cervantes. And that over there is Miguel Lavolpe. Miguel, as you can see, broke his leg. The doctor says he will be going home tomorrow. I am here because of, well, it is rather embarrassing. Diarrhea. I ate something that didn't agree with me three days ago and I haven't been able to stop going. I apologize in advance if I should wake you in the night with my noises.

In any case, Miguel and I like to tell stories to pass the time. Perhaps you would like to tell one of your own. Or simply listen.

I will go first.

This is the story of *La Arrugada*, The Wrinkled One.

No, Miguel, it is not about an old woman. Please, no more interruptions.

A very long time ago there was a *young* nurse who worked at this very hospital. Her name was Beatriz. She was a very good nurse, gentle and caring with her patients. She was the best nurse in the entire hospital. Beatriz did not perform miracles but her patients were the happiest patients in the hospital and many of them did get better, more so than the other nurses' patients.

The other nurses began to get jealous of this. And so they worked out an elaborate scheme to get even. They enlisted the assistance of a doctor at the hospital. He was very handsome.

The nurses started writing love letters to Beatriz from the doctor. With each letter, she became more and more intrigued and at some point fell in love with the doctor. She began writing back. Finally, the doctor asked Beatriz to meet him on the roof one night.

There was a beautiful full moon and it was warm.

¿Qué? Yes, Miguel, just like tonight. Now, please, let that be the last interruption.

"Oh, doctor," Beatriz said sweetly. "I love you too."

Suddenly all the nurses came out of the shadows and started laughing. The doctor laughed too.

"Did you enjoy our little joke?" they asked.

"Well, back to work everyone," the head nurse said.

After they all left, Beatriz walked over to the edge of the building. She stared at the street below. It was a long way down. She thought about jumping. She thought about it for a long time. Eventually, however, she stepped back from the abyss and returned to work.

But as the days went by, she became sadder and sadder. She lost interest in everything. Even in her patients. She began to show up to work late with a dirty, smelly, and very wrinkled uniform.

Beatriz was eventually fired. She never recovered from the cruel joke and died soon thereafter.

About a year later, rumors started spreading throughout the hospital that a ghost was roaming the halls late at night.

Some said it was Beatriz looking to take revenge on the other nurses. Others said she was looking for the doctor. Some said she looked and walked like a normal person, while others claimed she floated and glowed with a ghostly malice.

All the stories agreed, however, on two points. Beatriz was no longer gentle and caring. She had become evil, consumed with a burning hatred. And she still wore the terribly wrinkled uniform.

Sometimes an unfortunate patient would make the mistake of interrupting the ghost, this *fantasma*, from her mission. When someone would call out in the night for help, the ghost would sometimes appear. And she would be most displeased.

Patients suddenly started dying in the hospital. Not the ones in critical or grave condition either. The ones in good condition. Patients who had no business dying.

What's that? You are in pain? Oh, that is too bad. *Que lastima*. There is that switch by the side of the bed. Yes, that one. The nurse will soon come with your medication.

Allow me to return to our story. It will perhaps help take your mind off the pain.

Unfortunately, there is not much more to tell. It is just a story after all, but some of the more superstitious insist that the ghost of Beatriz is real and that she returns with the coming of the full moon.

Wait. What was that? Out in the hall. Did you hear it? Did you hear the words?

"Doctor, is it you? *Te quiero, mi amor*. I still love yooooou…"

It must be her.

[Whisper] *Por el amor de Dios*, do not make a sound. God protect us. She is coming. Our only hope is to pretend we are asleep. It is she, *La Arrugada*. She has answered your call. The door is opening. Do you smell the filthy uniform? Oh, no. Do not look upon her face. It is twisted with hate. Oh, and the wrinkles. The horrible wrinkles.

Save yourselves. Save yoursel—

AAAAAAH!

Room for Two More

Ted and Wendy passed through mile after mile of the most epic winter wonderland. The sky above was a brilliant blue, and the snow was not too soft and not too hard. Even Goldilocks would have said it was just right. The two snowshoers were heading toward a place on the map called *Satan's Lava Flow*.

“This is amazing but, dude, I’m so hungry I would sell my soul for a brownie,” Ted said after a few hours.

Just then they saw smoke in the distance. A fire, they both thought. It would be sweet to warm themselves by a fire while they ate lunch. After a few more minutes, they came to a cabin-like shelter.

“According to the map, this isn’t supposed to be here,” Ted said.

“Well, I’m going in,” Wendy said. “You can stay out here and eat your map.”

It was dark and smoky inside. Old, rustic benches surrounded a black wood stove. When their eyes adjusted to the darkness, Wendy and Ted saw that they were not alone.

A man sat huddled in the darkest corner of the shelter. A tattered, red wool blanket pulled tightly around his head made it hard to see his face except for his hollow, tired eyes, which looked out in the distance.

Ted said hello but the man didn’t answer. The man’s presence seriously weirded them out, so they quickly chomped down their lunch and said good-bye. Once again the man didn’t answer.

Then just as they were about to leave, he suddenly turned toward them and those dead eyes came to life with an evil, dark glow that illuminated the shelter and threw dark shadows into their souls. He seemed to speak to them without words, and the things he said filled Ted and Wendy with a cold that had nothing to do with the temperature.

They quickly put on their snowshoes and headed back into the woods. Ted turned around once and thought he saw the entire hut glowing with that horrible, dark light. Wendy could have sworn she heard terrible laughter coming from its direction. They quickly crunched through the woods in silence. Ted finally spoke.

“Man, that guy was creepy.”

“No duh,” Wendy said. “Did you see how he looked at us?”

The short winter day was getting shorter and a storm was moving in. Fortunately the snowshoers saw a sign that told them they were just two miles from their car.

“Almost there,” Ted said.

“Almost there,” Wendy said.

A dark wind began ripping through the trees, knocking down huge icicles from the branches. The sky was now the color of snow and their legs began to ache.

After an hour they came to another sign. Ted studied the sign through weary eyes and then studied it some more.

“According to this we’re still two miles from the parking lot,” Ted sighed. “I don’t understand it.”

He was sure they had made all the right turns at all the right places. A sick feeling gripped his bowels at the next intersection. There, another sign told them they were no closer to the car.

“Okay, someone’s playing a joke,” Wendy said. “Maybe somebody switched all the signs.”

Snow began to fall sideways as Ted pulled the map and compass out of his pack.

“Forget those dumb signs,” he said in a shaky voice. “If we start heading north, we’re bound to reach the parking lot or at least the highway.”

Horror-struck, he saw the compass needle spinning madly. Round and round it went. Ted yelled and threw the compass against a nearby tree. Then, too tired to hold the anger, he dropped to his knees.

Which way was north? Everything looked the same. No landmarks. Just trees in every direction. Wendy wondered how things had turned so bad so fast. The wind was blowing harder now, the snow sticking to the trees like the fear that began to coat their insides. And it was getting cold. Very cold.

"We've got to s-s-start moving," Ted said through chattering teeth. They patted each other on the shoulders the way football players do before a game.

"We can do this," Ted said.

"We can do this!" Wendy shouted back.

An hour later the sky had disappeared behind the screaming snow and it was getting harder and harder to see. Still, with legs of lead they plowed on.

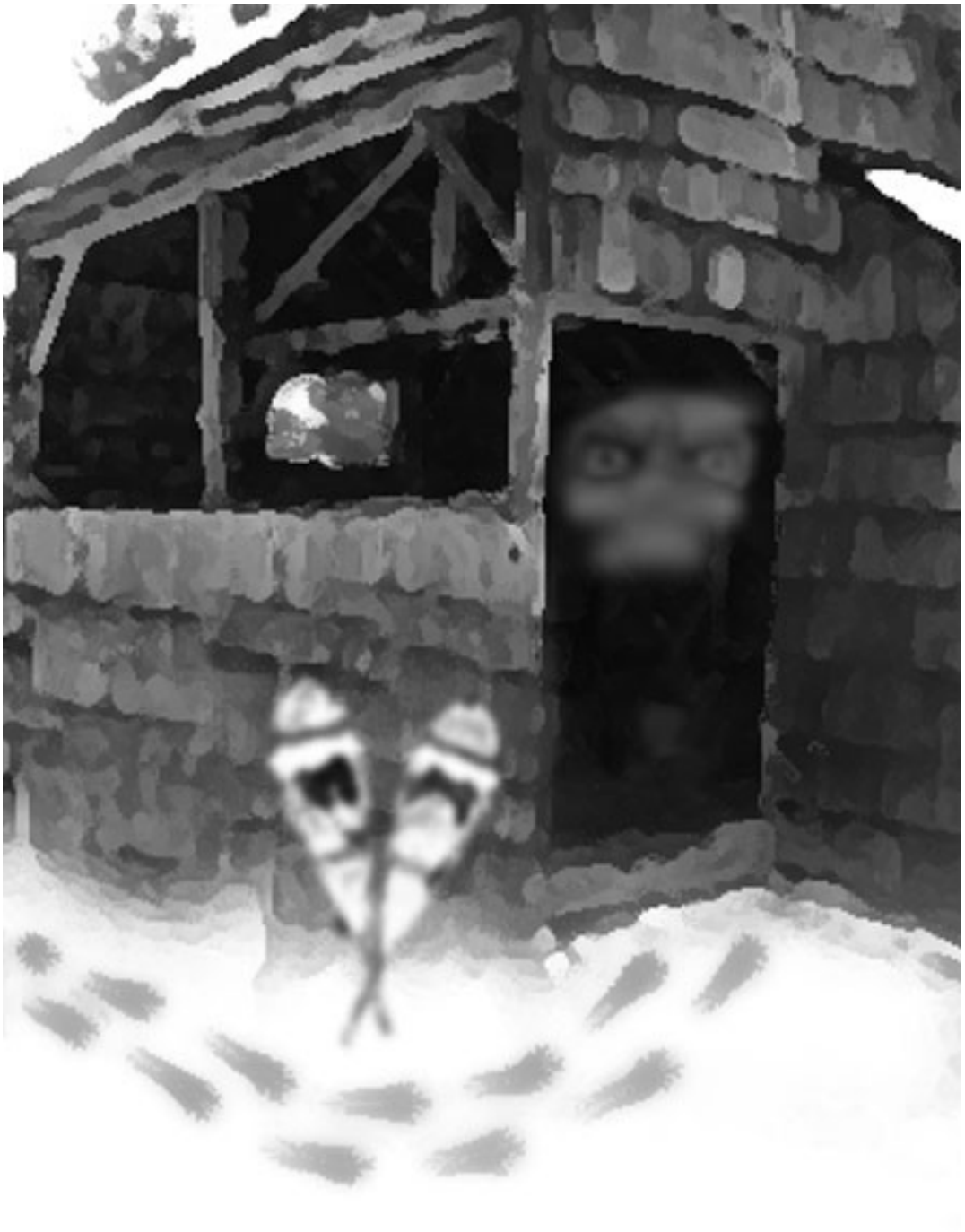
"I'm tired," Wendy whispered a few minutes later. "So tired. Wait... Do you smell that?"

It was the strong smell of blackened wood, like a fire after the fire has gone out. Somehow the shelter must be close by, Ted thought. They could get warm and rest and get out of the storm. Through the driving snow, they could barely make out the outline of the wooden structure. The last of their energy gone, they smiled weakly at each other and shuffled toward it. Then they stopped dead in their tracks.

The man was still there. Ted saw those evil eyes, looking past the snow and the darkness, looking into him. And Wendy heard the laughter again. *That terrible laughter*.

They went inside.

[Laugh your most crazy-sounding laugh while making crazy eyes at your audience.]



Pagliaccio

Mario was walking home late one night. He was exhausted. He had worked his day shift followed by his friend's night shift at the mannequin factory. Sixteen straight hours.

"That's the last time I do that," he mumbled. "The last time."

The streets were deserted. It was a clear, cold, and windy night. Mario pulled the hood of his sweatshirt tight around his head. The wind was blowing trash down the alleys and cutting into his face.

He heard a strange, far-off sound. At first Mario thought it was the wind. It had to be. But as he got closer, he realized that it was singing. It was the saddest sound Mario had ever heard. Horrible laughter and heartbreaking sobs mixed in with the Italian words.

"Laugh, clown, at your broken love!

Laugh at the sadness that poisons your heart!"

Mario's route home took him closer and closer to the terrible sound. It had to be coming from a radio or stereo, he thought. But as he turned a corner, Mario saw that he was wrong. There was a man dressed as a clown, sitting on the curb, with his face in his hands. He was singing and laughing and crying all at once. It seemed impossible, but that's what was happening.

A mixture of fear and pity gripped Mario as he slowly walked up to the man.

"What's the matter?" Mario asked, bending over the clown. "Can I do anything to help?"

The clown kept crying into his hands. Mario grabbed the man's shoulder and the clown turned toward him. He dropped his hands from his face and stopped singing.

Mario then saw that the clown had no makeup and no eyes and no nose, just a horrible mouth with thin lips that stretched from ear to ear!

Mario gasped and struggled for air as he stumbled away down the sidewalk. He ran faster than he had ever run in his life. At first he could hear the clown singing again somewhere far behind him.

"Laugh, clown, at your broken love!

Laugh at the sadness that poisons your heart!"

Then all Mario could hear was the beating of his own heart.

After running several blocks, he finally began to slow down. Walking again, he started to catch his breath. He almost began to think that he had imagined the whole thing. But that face, now forever burned into his memory, told him it had been real. It was *too* horrible to imagine.

He started to walk faster. He wasn't far from home, but on this night each block felt like a mile.

And then he saw it. A taxi was parked up ahead. It had its lights on.

"Why not?" Mario said to himself. "I deserve a break."

He slid into the back of the cab and told the driver his address. Mario looked out the window at the buildings going by. He felt better and began to get sleepy. But after a while, he realized something was wrong.

"Hey, you're going the wrong way," Mario said to the driver. "My house is in the opposite direction."

The driver didn't answer. He turned off the meter and kept driving the wrong way.

"Hey!" Mario shouted. "Turn this car a—"

A song came on the radio. The music sounded hauntingly familiar. Then Mario heard the singer's words.

"Laugh, clown, at your broken love!

Laugh at the sadness that poisons your heart!"

Mario put his hands over his ears and began screaming. The last thing he saw was the driver turn toward him.

Somehow, Mario hadn't noticed that he was dressed as a clown. But he now saw—saw too late—that the man's face had no makeup and no eyes and no nose, just thin lips that stretched from ear to ear!

I Doooooooooooo...

Dan's knees shook like leaves on a windy day.

"Focus, Dan, focus," he told himself.

Dan had never gotten over his fear of heights. He had just learned to control it by paying attention to the small details of his job. For the last several years, Dan had been a window washer, hanging off the side of some of the tallest buildings in town.

"Wet it down," Dan reminded himself. "Now use the squeegee."

But Dan's knees weren't shaking on this day because he was hundreds of feet off the ground. He was shaking because he was excited. Linda worked on the top floor of this building. And tonight after work, he was going to ask Linda to marry him.

As Dan was working on the floor below Linda's office, he reached into his pocket to look at the ring he had bought her.

"I hope she says *yes*," he said out loud.

Suddenly the ring slipped out of Dan's sweaty hand. It bounced off the scaffold he was standing on and landed on the ledge of the building. He tried to reach it but his safety harness didn't let him. There was only one thing to do. Dan removed the harness and stretched for the ring.

Just as he grabbed it, a powerful gust of wind hit. The scaffold swayed violently. Dan lost his balance and fell over the side.

Dan found himself hanging from the bottom of the platform by the fingers of his left hand. His feet danced below him high above the busy street. Somehow, he was still squeezing his right fist around the ring.

With his heart screaming in his ears, Dan quickly put the ring in his pocket and grabbed hold with both hands. Using all his strength, he pulled himself back onto the scaffold and into his harness.

"That was close," Dan said, trying to catch his breath. "But it's all good now."

A few minutes later, Dan happily pounded on the window glass to get Linda's attention. She didn't hear him, so he pounded harder. Again she didn't hear. He started hitting the window so hard he thought the glass would break.

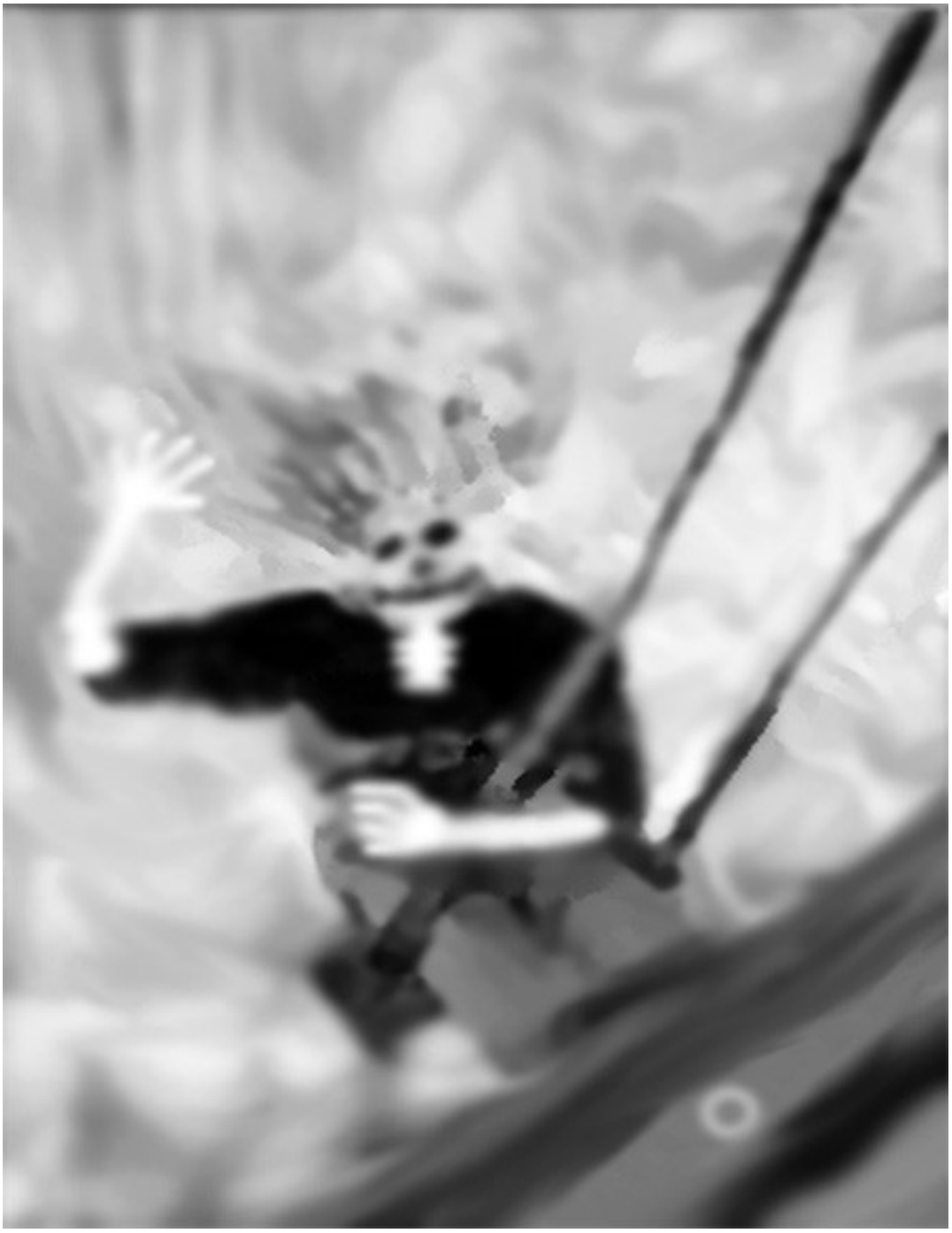
Finally, Linda looked up from her work and came toward the window where Dan was waving now. A look of horror filled her face. She turned pale and crashed to the floor.

"Linda!" Dan screamed. "Lindaaaaaaaaa!"

Linda's best friend Barbara, who had heard the noise from next door, helped Linda up to a nearby chair.

"It was Dan, wasn't it?" Barbara asked.

"Yes," Linda said through her sobbing. "He came back just like he always does each year on this day. The day 13 years ago when he fell to his death."



All the Pretty Zombies

Zach Seborhea was the world's first ever zombie scientist. He was a zombie. And he was a scientist. He was a zombie scientist.

"Zombies are at a distinct disadvantage in today's monster-friendly society," he said one day. "Their brains are toast and they're butt ugly."

“I can’t do anything about the first one, but I have an idea on how to make us better looking.”

So Zach Seborhea began working on a formula to make zombies pretty. First he experimented on zombie mice. After countless failed attempts, he finally came up with a cream that made the mice extremely handsome. But then they died.

“I think their fried zombie mice minds couldn’t stand the shock of the transformation,” he said to his assistant. “I’ll just have to try it out on myself.”

Zach Seborhea applied the cream to his butt-ugly face.

“What the heck,” he said, rubbing some on his face-ugly butt as well.

At first nothing happened. Then he felt a terrible burning. And then…

“You look so pretty, master,” he heard his assistant say. “Make now me pretty too.”

He had done it! He had done it!

He soon opened “Zach Seborhea’s Zombie Beauty College.”

Zombies lined up around the block waiting for their jars of “Zach Seborhea’s Pretty Zombie Cream.”

After that, it didn’t take long for zombies to take over the world. There wasn’t even a war. Vampires didn’t stand a chance. Sure, they were still smarter, but they no longer were the prettiest monsters in town. And that made all the difference.

The bodies started piling up. Wooden stakes and garlic powder had nothing to do with it. The vampires were dying of natural causes.

They were dying of broken hearts. Their girlfriends had all left them for those pretty tuxedo-wearing zombies.

Booey, hooey, hooey…

Going Down

The elevator doors opened and Louis stepped in. The only other passenger was a little old woman. She had a shawl pulled over her head and Louis couldn't see her face. But there was something familiar about her.

The elevator slowly made its way down, down, down to the lobby. Louis and the old woman rode in silence. When the metal box stopped, nothing happened. The doors didn't

open. Louis waited patiently. In all his 58 years, he had never been scared of elevators or of tight spaces. But Louis was suddenly gripped with the feeling that he had to get out. He pushed the “open” button several times. Nothing happened.

Then Louis pushed all the buttons. Again, nothing happened. The old woman seemed untroubled.

“Come on,” Louis said in a shaky voice. “Come on.”

He began pounding on the doors.

“Get me out of here!” he shouted as the doors continued to remain closed.

The old woman then reached over with a trembling, bony hand and pressed the button that read “basement.” The elevator began to move. A few moments later the basement light lit up. But the elevator did not stop. It kept moving. Louis could feel it dropping down, down, down.

“We’ve reached the bottom,” Louis shouted. “How could we still be going down?”

“Oh, we’re not at the bottom quite yet, Louis,” the old woman said.

Louis knew that voice. He grabbed the old woman and spun her around to see her face.

It was the face of his dead mother. Her small eyes danced with evil.

“I was a bad mother and you were a bad son,” she whispered horribly. “I’ve arranged it so that we can spend more time together. Now we’ll have all the time in the world. All the time in the wooooooorld.”

Louis dropped to his knees and cried and the elevator kept going down, down, down…

It's a Wrap

Billy Bob and Bobbie Jo were parked up where Old Mill Road dead ends at the southern tip of Lake Boudreaux. It was a quiet, moonlit night in late April—still too early for swimming but just right for pondering. The two sweethearts were talking about their plans after high school.

"I'm glad you're going to college," Billy Bob said.

“Wish you’d come too,” Bobbie Jo said.

“I just don’t kno—” Billy Bob said and stopped.

There was a loud whining sound and then a metal-meets-bone crunching followed by horrible screaming.

“What was that?” Bobbie Jo asked bug-eyed, sliding closer to Billy Bob.

“It sounded like it came from the old mill,” he said. “But that place’s been closed for years.”

Everything was quiet again.

Then a few moments later a heavy thump rocked the bed of Billy Bob’s pickup truck. When he and Bobbie Jo looked back, they couldn’t believe their eyes. It looked like a body! It was just sitting there, wrapped in bloody bandages from head to toe.

“Help meeee,” it moaned.

And then it started to move toward them.

“Get us out of here!” Bobbie Jo yelled.

Frozen by fear, Billy Bob could only stare.

“Come on!” she said, punching Billy Bob hard on the arm.

Billy Bob started the truck and took off.

The thing in the bandages moved closer and closer until it was just outside the window. Bobbie Jo could now see its face, covered except for the eyes. Those terrible eyes pleaded with her.

“Help meeee,” it moaned again, pounding on the glass.

As the truck flew faster and faster down the winding road back to town, it hit a bump. Bobbie Jo bounced up and hit her head. When she looked behind her again, the thing wasn’t there.

“I think it’s gone,” she said, breathless.

“What do you mean, gone?” Billie Bob said.

“It’s not there,” Bobbie Jo said.

“I don’t care,” Billie Bob said. “I’m not slowing down till we get to town.”

A few minutes later, the pickup truck stopped at *Elmore’s Gas ‘n Git*. Billie Bob and Bobby Jo got out and walked slowly toward the back. There was nothing there. Billie Bob kept staring at the back of the truck.

“Did we just imagine that?” Bobbie Jo said.

Billie Bob shook his head.

“That would work except for two things,” he said as he picked something out of the truck bed. “For starters, my ‘magination’s not that good.”

“What’s the other reason?” Bobbie Jo asked.

Billie Bob held up what he had just found in the back of the truck.

It was a bloody bandage.

The Delicious Death of Jay Whitebread

Jay Whitebread was a writer of children's books. His specialty was scary stories. He was very popular with parents and teachers and that whole army of kids who said they liked scary stories just as long as they weren't *too* scary.

Jay Whitebread was their man.

He wrote them long and boring. It was like he had designed an amusement park full of roller coasters that just sat there. No one had nightmares and everyone went along for the ride.

On this one not-too-spooky night, Jay Whitebread was rewriting an old story about a woman who always wore a velvet ribbon around her neck. She never took it off. One night while the woman slept, her husband—who just couldn't stand it any longer—removed the ribbon. The story was supposed to end with the woman's head coming off and rolling onto the floor.

But Jay Whitebread thought that was much too violent. What would teachers say? What would parents do when their children woke up crying in the middle of the night? No, no, no. The head coming off just wouldn't do. So he changed the ending.

Jay Whitebread kept the woman's head attached. When the husband took off the velvet ribbon, all that happened was the wife waking up and saying, "Boo."

No nightmares there. A few more stories like that and Jay Whitebread would soon have another soft batch ready to send off to his publisher.

Inside his big mansion on the hill, Jay Whitebread rewarded himself with a little cup of vanilla ice cream and sat in his big leather chair in front of one of his five fireplaces, looking very pleased with himself.

Suddenly there was crazy laughter coming from the chimney and a pound-pound-pounding as if something was making its way down toward the fireplace. Standing now, Jay Whitebread dropped his little cup of vanilla ice cream when he saw what it was.

Out of the fireplace and onto the floor rolled the head of the woman from Jay Whitebread's story.

"You don't scare nobody, Mr. Writer!" it cackled, rising off the ground. "Maybe you should write romance novels!"

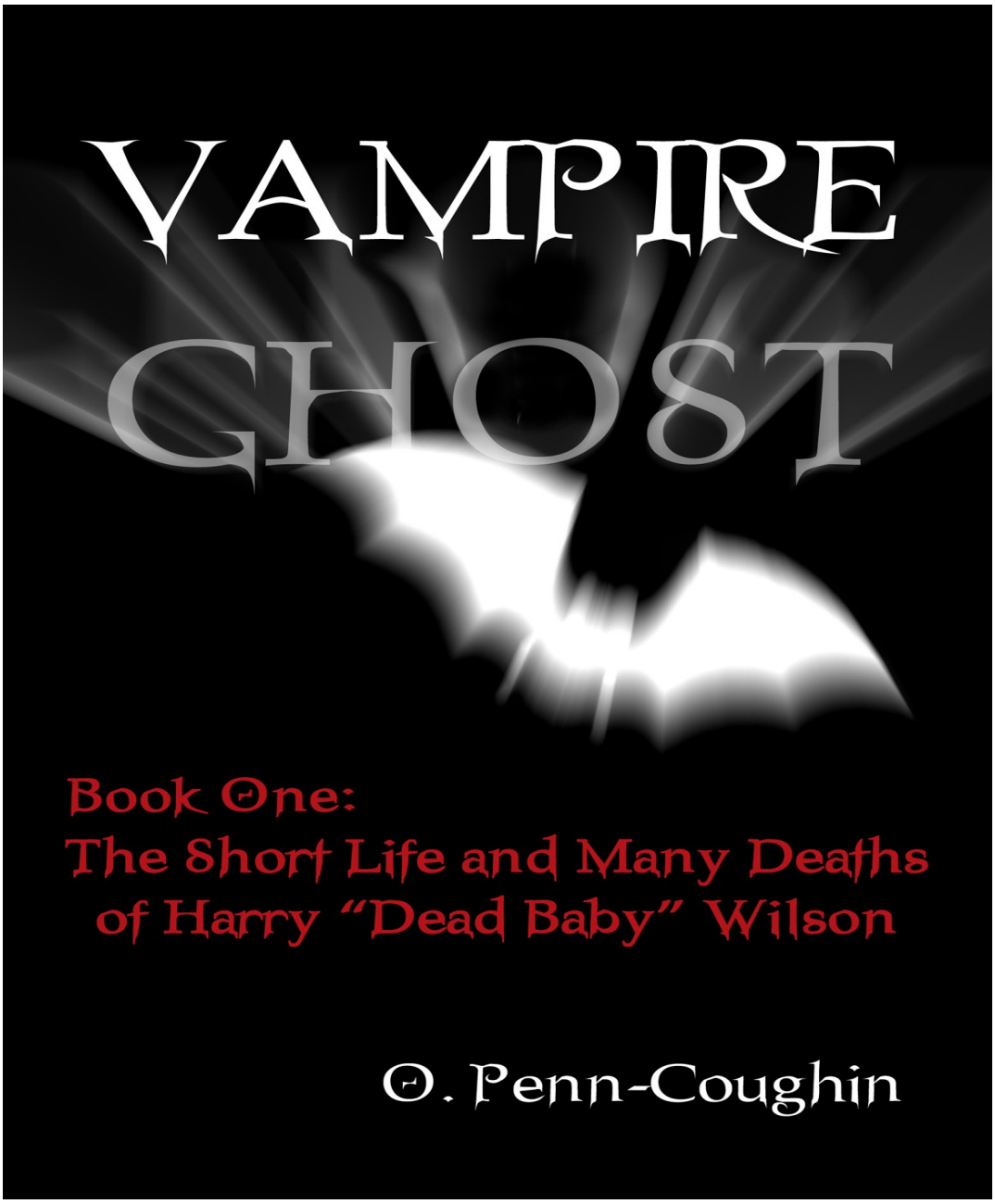
The head floated closer and closer to Jay Whitebread's terrified face. From just a few inches away, it looked into his eyes and whispered, "Hey, you're kinda cute."

The head then closed its eyes, opened its mouth, and kissed Jay Whitebread on the lips.

Jay Whitebread turned as white as his vanilla ice cream and dropped dead. From outside the mansion, hideous cackling—and typing—could be heard long into the night.

Vampire Ghost:
The Short Life and Many Deaths
of Harry "Dead Baby" Wilson

by
O. Penn-Coughin



INTRODUCTION

The fat kid was sucking on the chocolate shake like his brain was gonna implode. I *slipped* inside. Props to the kid. He knew his stuff. Fighting against the laws of inertia and gravity, the straw poked down into that frozen, sugary world of milky goodness like a divining rod. *Sooooo* good. Those perfect flavors and sensations on the tongue, oozing down the throat. The rich chocolate gooey sweetness of it all. We—me and the kid—were totally in the moment. Not thinking about anything else. Focused to the max. Shutting out all distractions.

It was heaven. For a few seconds there, we were in fat kid heaven. The plump angels sang, or drooled, or did whatever plump angels do at such moments.

That's when I saw her.

Well, I didn't actually see her. It was more like I was violently thrown into her from across the room. The hamburger and fries sat untouched on her plate. She mostly looked away from the food, out the window at the rain. After a while she reached down for a fry. Yes! The salt on *our* lips. The golden outer layer fried to serious perfection. The heat escaping from the white potato core. And the taste of… sadness. Suddenly everything went bland as we slowly chewed on the fry and I couldn't taste anything except for that sadness. Total and utter despair. It was like being trapped in a vampire movie.

"Whoa," I moaned, thankful that my time was up.

Speaking of vampires, I suppose I should introduce myself before I go any further. Good evening—as they say—my name is Harry *Dead Baby* Wilson and I am one. A vampire that is, not a dead baby.

Well, actually, if I'm going to be perfectly honest, large parts of that last statement are technically *un*true. First of all, people did think I was a dead baby for a while. (I promise to get to that story shortly.) And in my current state, I am, sad to say, closer to being one than a vampire. A dead baby, that is.

That's because I'm a dead vampire. Emphasis on dead. Not *undead*, because then I would still be a vampire. Just dead. Well, not just dead either because if I were just dead I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing here. Because, as the saying goes, dead men tell no tales. Certainly not dead vampires.

Think about it for a moment.

What happens after a vampire *dies*?

What happens after too much garlic, holy water, or sunlight? What happens after the cross or the fire or the stake—ah, yes, the dreaded stake—have done their dirty work?

Nothing of course. Nothing happens. That's how the movie always ends. Everyone knows that. That's what we've always been told, and that's what I always believed, too.

Until it happened to me.

When I *died*, I didn't exactly disappear into nothingness. Okay, I pretty much did disappear into nothingness. But after the expected ashes-to-ashes vaporization thing, there was still something left. It's hard to put into words. I suppose one way of looking at it is that I am what the cat would drag in—*if* it could see me and *if* there were something to see.

The theories are mostly right though. I am mostly all gone. I've lost it all. I've lost my eyes and ears and teeth (including fangs) and toes. My spleen, my liver, my small and my large intestine, and my heart. I've lost my brains and my mind. I've lost my mind so many times, in fact, I've lost count. Lost *count*. Get it? As in *Count* Dracula? (I know, if you have to explain a joke, it couldn't have been a very good joke to begin with. Best get used to it though.)

But anyway, with all these things and so many others gone, somehow *something* remains, something with which to tell the tale.

Here's my story then, from the beginning…

Oh, and slap me if I start sounding like a sad vampire. Slap me hard.

You don't want to go through life as a sad vampire. Life's too short. (Even for vampires.)

The last thing anyone needs is another sad blood brooder, moping around, feeling sorry for itself. Why, even skeletons find certain things *humerus*. (I have to chuckle. You see, the humerus is that long bone in your upper arm. Man, it's just the intro and I've already had to explain two jokes.)

Anyway, I can't abide sad vampires. Loathe 'em. Detest 'em. Hate 'em. Can't stand 'em.

So slap me hard.

Chapter One:
WHERE IT BEGAN

Before we begin, a few ground rules might be in order. Well, maybe just one. I feel it should almost go without saying but… Please, no dead baby jokes.

Speaking of which, let's get my name out of the way.

I *died* for the first time on January 23, 1913. That also happens to be the day I was born. The doctor told my parents that their brand new baby boy, Harrison Mortecai Wilson, was dead. A terrible shock followed by terrible sadness. And then a funeral. Sobbing and wailing and no end of grief. It was so sad that *I* even started crying. And that's what saved me. Somehow my uncle heard the sounds coming from inside the little coffin.

"Shhh," he called out. "Quiet, please."

"What's wrong with you? You can't tell people not to cry at a funeral," his wife said. "Stop your nonsense, you silly man."

"No, please, everyone," he said. "Just for a moment, we need a little quiet for just a moment."

The church was full of red, swollen eyes suddenly hating on my uncle.

But then they heard it too. Noises coming from the casket. From *inside* the casket. Snakes? Rats? Postmordem gas? No. Crying. A baby crying.

Some of the mourners must have been horror-struck. You have to admit there's something really creepy about the idea of a zombie baby. It didn't stop my mother though. She lunged toward the little pine box like a fast, well, zombie.

"Harry?" she cried. "Harry!"

She began prying at the lid with her fingers.

"Open it!" she screamed. "Get him out of there!"

A few minutes later the nails were off and I was in my mother's arms.

It turns out I was never really dead. I was born early, several weeks premature, and looked the part. I was a goner. Everyone thought as much. The doctor had been up all night and made a mistake. He didn't hear my tiny heart beating. My family was too happy to be angry and would have let it go. Still, some things are hard to live down. The doctor left town a few days later. They say he never picked up a stethoscope again.

So that's how I got the name *Dead Baby*.

Like I said: no jokes. A wisp of a smile perhaps. Maybe a snicker or the odd titter if you must.

After that, my life settled down to a somewhat normal childhood.

I can't remember much. I remember my mother's face. I think I remember the taste of ice cream. And I remember soccer.

Baseball was king back then and most Americans hadn't even heard of soccer. Fortunately for me, there were a lot of immigrants living in the town where I grew up. People from Ireland and Italy, Argentina and England. People who loved the game and passed it on to their children. There was something infectious about it. It poured itself into you and changed you.

I remember the ball at my feet. I remember the smell of the grass and the sweat on my face. I remember the feeling of scoring a goal. There's nothing else like that feeling in the whole world. If you don't know that, you truly are the *undead* one around here. Long before I had a taste for blood, I had a hunger for the back of the net. The game was, you might say, in my blood.

Oh, another thing. When I was three I bit a dog. That's right, *I* bit the dog. And then the dog bit me. I don't remember what I was thinking. Sometimes dogs bite you for no reason. Maybe I was doing the same thing. Maybe I was just trying to get in the first punch. Or bite, as it were. Perhaps it was an omen. (You think?)

I was 13 years old when it happened. I was walking home after playing with some friends. We would play in the unpaved street for hours and hours, using trashcans for the goals. The ball was usually made of old rags. The sun had just gone down. It was a Friday. My mother always made fish on Fridays and I wasn't in a great hurry to get home. As I walked slowly down the dark, deserted streets, I suddenly heard a noise coming from an alley. A man in a pork pie hat stepped out of the shadows.

"Hey, kid," Pork Pie whispered. "Help me over here a minute."

I walked over toward him.

Nothing about the way he was dressed suggested that he was a monster. He looked like just another bum, as we would say in those days. He looked like he had slept in a boxcar for a week. But there was something about his eyes. The way they seemed to glow and throw off a strange light.

At first it felt like I was in a black and white movie. But then those eyes turned red, cutting through the shadows. There was hate and hunger in them. It took a moment too long for my brain to scream, "Run!"

Anticipation was one of the things that made me a good soccer player. I would go to the place on the field where the ball was going to be, not where it was. But on this early evening in July—my last as a human—I had none of those powers.

It all happened so fast. There was nothing I could do. Looking back I suppose I could have tried to run away. Learning what I later would about vampires though, I doubt it would have made a difference. Back then I didn't even know what a vampire was. No one had heard of Bela Lugosi.

I didn't run.

By the time I figured out something was horribly wrong, something was horribly wrong. It was too late. My legs didn't listen. His teeth closed in.

All the energy in my body left at the same time. I felt completely paralyzed, but I could still feel pain. And the pain was terrible. It burned in my neck and throughout my whole body and when I thought it couldn't get any worse, it did. Everything went black. And when I woke up again, I started to learn the true meaning of *worse.*

I don't know how long I was out, but it must have been most of the night because the first light of dawn was just appearing on the horizon. I wanted to run home but something told me to take shelter. I spent my first day as a vampire in a tool shed. It was one of the few sleepless days I would have in the next 84 years. Vampires usually sleep like the dead.

I spent the day thinking about what had happened and what it meant. I had a new understanding of things that was very different from how humans acquire their knowledge. An inner sense had awakened in me that had nothing to do with facts. It went way beyond mere facts.

I knew that for the second time in my life, I was dead. But this time I was really dead. There was no turning back, no going back. Here was one coffin I couldn't get out of. Well, literally I could, but what good would it do? I was still dead, or undead if you prefer. Either way, I was no longer alive.

I was dead to all that I had known before. Dead to the possibility of ever growing up. Dead to the possibility of ever seeing the sun again. Dead to my friends. Dead to my family.

I would never, ever, *ever* by able to see my family again. Like a cross over a grave, that part was the *t* that transformed "worse" into "worst."

I felt like I would be stuck at my own funeral for the rest of time. I'm not going to lie to you. I cried and cried and cried, and for a time became that thing I so loathe: a sad vampire.

I lurked around my neighborhood at night, watching my mother from a distance. She must have wondered what had happened to me, where I was, why I didn't come home that night. In a matter of days, her face became old and the light left her eyes.

I had to leave too.

The dead, human part of me thought about going up to her and saying, "Here I am, it's not all that bad." But the vampire part of me—which was the only real part there was now—screamed that it would only make things worse. My new inner sense told me that human mothers and vampire sons never work. Once the mothers realize that their children are undead, blood-sucking monsters, they always end up wishing the same thing: that their sons were dead, stake-through-the-heart-dust-blowing-in-the-wind dead.

I had no choice. I couldn't tell my mother I was alive or dead or undead. I could only hope that one day her pain would ease and she would be able to see the good in life again. I left town the next night.

You might think I had a few consolations.

I know. When you feel like your life sucks, you fantasize about what it would be like to be a vampire. Sounds pretty cool. The reality, I'm here to tell you, is a little different.

Okay, what about living forever? That part sounds good too, doesn't it?

But I learned you can't live forever. Even if you are smart and lucky enough to elude an eternity of sunrises and stakes, you can only live one moment at a time. We are all the same that way. From mosquitoes to humans to vampires. One moment at a time is all we have. I'll stop now because those last few lines make it sound like I work for a greeting card company. But it doesn't change the truth of what I'm trying to say. If you play your cards right, sometimes one magnificent moment is enough.

If some of these concepts sound advanced or complicated for a 13-year-old, you must remember that my combined age is more like 97. I spent 13 years as a boy and 84 as a

vampire, and if my math is correct, that comes out to 97. You can't help but learn something in 97 years, even if it's by accident. I would guess then that my ideas are actually pretty immature for someone who's almost 100 years old.

You must also keep in mind that I'm a terrible card player, so any advice I give on the subject has to be taken with a lot of those little white crystals found in the container with the umbrella girl on the cover.

Anyway, that's how I became a vampire.

Chapter Two:
THE VAMPIRE YEARS

I never saw that vampire again. The one who ended my days as a human. *Pork Pie* swooped down into my life like a dark shadow and just as quickly disappeared into the night.

So there I was, a vampire orphan, having to figure it all out on my own.

Some things came easily. Like avoiding sunburns. I can't take credit for that one. It's a survival instinct. It's almost like breathing. I guess that's a poor analogy though, since I wasn't really breathing anymore. In any case, staying away from sunlight was a total no brainer.

At first I tried to eat regular food, but it made me sick. I threw up a lot and went all skin and bones. Vampires don't die from malnutrition, but if they don't feed they get weak and lethargic like a snake on a cold morning. At some point my survival instincts kicked in and…

I got myself a rat.

It sounds worse than it is. (I say that now.) Anyway, when you're hungry enough, you will do and eat just about anything. Even a rat. The little suckers—the rats, not me—really have a good amount of blood in them. One rat can keep a teen vampire going for several days, I mean, nights. And vampires are immune to those nasty little diseases rats like to carry, so you basically just have to get past those beady little eyes and that creepy hair and the squeaky squealing and you're home free. Piece of cake. I mean rat.

I thought the hard part would be catching one, but I discovered I moved pretty fast. Much faster than when I was human.

Drinking blood for the first time was incredible. I could literally feel it going through by body, bringing me back to… I was going to say *life*, but those days were gone forever. I did, however, feel an energy and a power that was completely new and more intense than anything I had ever known.

Okay, I feel I should qualify that last statement. What I just said was true for me. It's probably true for other vampires. But it doesn't work for humans. I repeat, it doesn't work for humans. From time to time, you see those stories about people who want to be vampires so bad they try drinking blood. It's sad really. Goes against the first rule of nature: you are what you are. Second rule: you can't change what you are. You can only get better at being what you are. End of sermon.

I won't bore you with all the gory particulars of my night-to-night vampire existence. There are plenty of other places where you can read about such things. Some of those books and movies even come pretty close to the truth. For my money—and I don't have

any—Bram Stoker came the closest to capturing what it means to be a vampire. When in doubt, old school is usually the best school. That said, the parts about shapeshifting are fantasy. Pure fantasy. I don't think I could've turned myself into a cockroach, let alone a bat, if I had lived a thousand years.

And speaking of roaches, I sucked the life out of a lot of nasty things during me brief time as a vampire—and 84 years is a blink of an eye for a vampire or a human. You suck the life out of nasty things long enough and you become one of those things. You suck the life out of *un*-nasty things and you become a nasty thing even faster. I'm not proud of a lot of what I did. I'm not going to get into specifics, but let's just say that there are definite advantages to not being able to look at your face in the mirror.

By the way, most vampire-related human deaths are accidental. It's not that we care about our victims in some moral sense or anything like that. For one thing, it's not in our own best interest to bring attention to ourselves. And bloodless, dead bodies tend to do that. Bring attention. It also doesn't make sense to kill off your food supply. It's like you going to the grocery store and burning it down on your way out the door. You know you're going to go back. That's the same reason we don't go around turning humans into vampires at the drop of a hat—*Pork Pie* aside. Over population makes no sense.

I'd also like to set the record straight regarding a recent trend. There's been a serious effort lately to make vampires seem misunderstood and pretty. First, there's not much to understand. Vampires need blood, and they will do whatever is necessary to get it. (I know I did.) And *pretty* doesn't come in to play too often. *Pretty* has a butt full of splinters from sitting on the bench is what *pretty* has.

It's hard to be glamorous when your entire existence is ruled by the drive to suck the blood from any and all living things that cross your path. In fact, I can't remember the last time I met a glamorous vampire. That's definitely one thing the books, shows, and movies really miss the boat on. Of course, that's done on purpose. Glamour sells. That's the big edge vampires have over zombies.

Still, I will allow that the possibility exists that there's an alluring, exotic brooder somewhere out there because, unlike you humans, vampires are not all created equal. Remember, I was *created* by a guy in a pork pie hat. I rest my case.

Chapter Three:
HE SUCKS, HE SCORES!

As I said, the last thing I did as a human was to play soccer. Not very original, I know. There's already a famous vampire series about a boy who plays soccer. But it is the most popular sport in the world after all. For millions of people around the world soccer is what blood is to vampires. It's something we can't live without. So I think there's room for another story about a soccer-loving vampire.

Anyway, you can slap me all you want, but I'm not going to stop talking about soccer till I'm ready. It's my strongest memory, the most powerful connection I have to what it means to be human. And it made my life as a vampire worth living. I discovered that it was the one thing I didn't have to give up. So much of what it means to be human was lost to me. But not soccer. I could still play soccer. Man, could I play soccer.

And at first that was the problem.

It took me a while to figure out the game. As a human, I had to push myself to play harder, run faster, and be quicker. But as a vampire it was the complete opposite. I had to bring it down, keep it easy, use just enough of my abilities to appear *almost* superhuman. Almost being the key. That took some practice.

At first I would start dribbling and suddenly appear clear on the other end of the field. There was no way to defend me.

Here I am. Whoooooo. No, over here.

Understandably I suppose, some players were scared to play against or with a vampire, or whatever they thought I was. The ones who weren't didn't care much for the odds.

But with practice—and I had a lot of time to practice—I was able to control myself to the point where I played at the level of a Ronaldinho in his prime. I was something to see. A 13-year-old playing like Dinho. Barely average for a vampire, but not bad for a human.

On rare occasions, I would come across others like me. Soccer-playing vampires that were trying to pass off as humans. (*Pass*. Oh, that *was* a good one.) I have a theory that some of the greats might fall into this category. I never met Ronaldinho but I suspect he just might be a vampire. Come to think of it, I don't recall ever seeing him play during the day.

What's that you say? Cristiano Ronaldo? A vampire? No way. Dude is one hundred percent wannabe. Now, Messi's a different story. He doesn't look anything like you think a vampire should. But he sure plays like one. The little man could totally be passing. (Not to mention scoring.) Plus his nickname is *La Pulga*, the flea. And don't fleas suck blood? Mere coincidence? I think not.

But back to my story. I couldn't play during the day and, for far too many years, there weren't any lights on the fields. That, of course, made things even more complicated. I would show up at dusk and play for a few beautiful minutes before it got too dark for human eyes. And then I would practice alone. Sometimes through the night.

It usually didn't take long before the big team in town heard about me and wanted to sign me up. I tried it a few times, but it became a hassle coming up with excuses and reasons why I never got older and couldn't play day games.

So I kept on the move, going from town to town in search of blood and soccer, soccer and blood.

That was pretty much my life for 84 years. Until one day when I once again died.

Chapter Four:
DEAD AGAIN

I had been sleeping in the same small building for the last couple of weeks. Vampires are totally vulnerable during the day and it's never smart to stay in one place too long. Something's bound to go wrong. And nothing increases that possibility like sticking to a routine, so I had decided this was to be my last day there. Turned out I was right.

There was a storage room in the back that didn't seem to serve any purpose. It was crammed with empty boxes and crates. I made a Styrofoam pillow and covered myself with a large, broken-down cardboard box. It was dark and peaceful and had everything I needed, including midnight snacks (i.e., rats).

I didn't use the traditional coffin associated with my kind. Given my *Dead Baby* history and all, I think it's somewhat understandable that coffins had always given me the creeps. In fact, I suffered from claustrophobia, so whenever possible I chose alternate accommodations.

What it was exactly that happened that morning I couldn't say because I was sleeping at the time. I woke up as if from a *light*mare—what you would call a nightmare—which I guess would be the term for a vampire's bad dream. Except that vampires don't dream.

It was hot, too hot even for August. Flames were shooting up all around me. Smoke filled the room and the wood from the crates began to pop like branches in a campfire. I burned my hands trying to open the door and managed to get out only to find that the entire building was going up in flames.

My choice seemed to be between burning up from the fire or, if I could somehow escape that inferno, from the rays of the sun. Since the fire was the more immediate threat, I ran from it. Large parts of my clothing and skin were on fire by the time I made it out into the parking lot and then the busy street. The glare was blinding. I knew there was a parking garage across the way because I ate there sometimes. If I could just make it down into that darkness, that sheltering darkness, I still had a chance. I was most of the way across the street when I was hit by a bus. At night that would not have been a problem. But out here in the light of day, it was the last nail in the coffin, as they say. The sun finished me off.

The pain was indescribable. There was too much of it for that whole life flashing before your eyes thing. Speaking of eyes, I tried to close them but my eyelids were one of the first things to burn off. I barely had time to think, *So this is how immortality ends*. The last thing I remember was being engulfed by the brightest light I had ever seen and then everything went black.

Chapter Five:
LIFE AFTER *DEATH*

So there I was, dead. Yet again. Let's see now, that made three if you consider the unofficial dead-baby-in-the-coffin episode, the *Pork Pie* end-of-life-as-we-know-it transformation, and now this little death-of-a-vampire number.

Of all three, this promised to be the most like baseball. As in three strikes and you're out. Because as I said in the introduction, when a vampire dies, that's it. End of story.

Life, though, is full of surprises. I was about to find out that death has at least that much in common with life.

I don't know how long I was out for after the fire/sun tag team of death experience. At some point I became aware. I felt a strange disconnection from my senses. I didn't seem to be able to see, smell, hear, taste, or touch anything. But it's not as if I couldn't completely feel any of those things either. It's difficult to explain. For example, I could somehow "see" my surroundings, but I wasn't seeing them through my eyes. The same with hearing and the other senses. I was aware, but I couldn't say how.

I didn't know what had happened. Things came at me through a fog. I remembered bits and pieces of the fire and the sun. Beyond that, though, it was all pretty blurry.

Was this Heaven (not likely given my track record) or Hell (a better investment if one were looking to bet the farm) or some place in between? Strangely, it didn't feel what I imagined any of those places would feel like.

As the days and nights went by, some things started to come into focus. For one, whatever form I had taken, it seemed I no longer needed any sleep. And I no longer had to fear the sun. This was really cool. Do you know what it feels like not to be out in the sunlight for 84 years? Well, I do. That's a long time right there, let me tell you.

The awesome joy of seeing the sun again didn't last long, however. This is how it went down.

I suddenly found myself out in the daylight. A coffin full of mixed emotions immediately hit me. It was amazing but at the same time quite troubling, to say the least, so I quickly looked down at my hand and arm to see what horrible, life-ending damage the sun was inflicting. The problem was I couldn't see my hand and arm. They weren't there. None of me was there. It was as if I no longer existed! I had become invisible!

As all this was happening, I noticed I was surrounded by people. But they couldn't see me. And they couldn't hear my screams. I started grabbing at them—not easy to do with no hands or arms—but, of course, I couldn't. I did, however, manage to pass through them and they passed through me. It was the same thing with objects.

I seemed to still be on earth. But there didn't seem to be any of me there.

I floated through this nightmare and had the thought that maybe this was Hell after all. I ran and ran and ran and ran and ran, passing through people and cars and buildings, and finally made it to a park with several soccer fields. Kids of all ages were practicing. This is just what I needed. A little soccer to clear my head.

I made my way over to one of the fields. I went after the ball. But I couldn't control it. It passed right through where my foot would and should have been. The players kept bunching around it the way they do when they don't know what they're doing. And the whole soccer amoeba lot of them passed right through me just like the ball. No matter how fast I moved and how hard I kicked, it made no difference. I wasn't there.

Now I had proof. I *was* in Hell. I had no doubt I was in Hell because Hell is a place where you can't play soccer.

I ran off screaming and crying. Big, fat ghost tears rolled down my ghost cheeks. And then it hit me that that's exactly what I was. A ghost. The ghost of a dead vampire.

Chapter Six:
GHOST SCHOOL

For a time I once again became that thing I loathe: a mopey vampire. Or rather, a mopey *ghost* vampire.

It's kind of pointless to debate how much of me is one and how much is the other. I don't think it's accurate to just call me a ghost. I think that would be totally appropriate if I had been a human and then died and became a ghost. But I was a vampire when I became a ghost. So I will stick with the term ghost vampire as opposed to plain ghost. No offense to you plain ghosts out there. When there's nothing left of you, these little distinctions are important. It's all you have.

Anyway, I was sad for quite a spell. (I must admit that the thought of killing myself crossed my mind, but then I remembered that I had been beaten to the punch. I was already dead.)

In the past whenever I felt this way, I could count on going to sleep and forgetting my troubles for a while. But as I mentioned, I no longer could or needed to sleep. I was awake all the time. That took some getting used to. I didn't get tired. (Except of myself.) This added a whole other layer to my torture. There was no escape from my thoughts and feelings and there was no escape from what I was. There's that first rule of nature again. Sometimes nature can be a real pain in the buttocks. Even when you can't find yours with two hands.

At some point I began exploring my condition: what I could and what I couldn't do. By far, this last one was the longer list. I also started to study people and the effect I had on them. I would watch them and envy them and hate them for what they had and what they were.

I soon discovered I didn't have the traditional haunting powers associated with ghosts. I couldn't get myself to be heard or seen if my life depended on it. (Oops, too late.)

I would spend days and days going "Boo!" to all sorts of people with nothing to show for it. I couldn't even scare a baby or those kids who are scared of their own shadows. I didn't register any sort of "presence," flying under the radar of the most sensitive ghost detecting equipment.

I was one sad, lame-ass ghost all right.

And no way could I move physical objects. I couldn't even turn the pages of an open book. Which was super frustrating since I loved to read. I had to find someone who was reading something interesting and follow along over his shoulder. But this didn't work very well since I still had the speed reading skills of a vampire. Humans read soooo slooooowly. I spent much more time spacing and daydreaming than reading.

Still, I started hanging out at the library. Sometimes I would stay there. Other times I found someone who checked out a book I was interested in and followed them home. More times than not this ended poorly because not only did I have to wait an eternity for them to turn the page, but I also had to wait until they actually picked up the book. Sometimes I would wait all day for them to get home and then they would finally open the book in bed and get through one whole paragraph before falling asleep.

Oh, here's another argument in favor of the *ghost vampire* term. I found that although I no longer needed to feed or even could, I still felt that desperate hunger. You can't just have blood as your sole source of sustenance and nourishment for 84 years and then suddenly go cold turkey and just… stop. It weighed heavily on my mind. Where would my next feed come from? I spent a lot of time in the early days tracking pretend prey and virtual victims. I even tried to bite a few of them. Of course, my nonexistent fangs passed right through them without once drawing blood.

I floated through my new existence like this for I don't know how long. Most of the time I didn't move too fast. There was no call. Where did I really need to go and why the rush? But if I did feel the need, I could still get around at vampire speed. So I guess that could also be considered one of my powers along with the ability to pass through solid objects. I'm not sure vampire speed has ever been scientifically studied or clocked, but I

would say we can do close to 70 mph when the spirit moves us. But as fast as that might sound to you, it's nothing compared to a vampire's quickness over short distances.

So there I was, going slow, going fast, going nowhere. And then one day it happened.

I was reading over—or through—someone's shoulder. I was waiting, waiting, waiting for the page to turn when a fly landed right on the reader's nose. She swatted at it and missed. I lost interest in the book and focused on the fly. I found myself wishing I could be that fly.

Oh, to have a body! Any body. Even an ugly fly body with those hideous, giant eyes. And all of a sudden I was that fly. Or rather, I was *inside* the fly. It was terrifying! Flying around like that, thinking fly thoughts. You see, not only could I see what the fly saw but I felt and thought what the fly felt and thought. What hunger. What terrible hunger. In a way, it felt strangely familiar. I never realized that flies and vampires had so much in common.

This first experience only lasted for a few seconds. But that was enough. It was horrifying and thrilling at the same time. I felt an excitement I hadn't felt since the last time I had played soccer.

This started happening more and more and at some point I realized that here was a skill, a power I could call my own. I couldn't always control it. Sometimes it just didn't work. Other times I would go into the wrong thing. It was scary and fun and gave me something to do with my days and nights.

Eventually as my skills improved, I worked my way up from insects to small animals. Cats were my favorite. Their minds are always searching for something new. Or something old. It doesn't matter. They treat everything as if it were new. But they bring their old knowledge along for the ride. As I always suspected, cats were very cool. They think of themselves in that way too. From what I can piece together, the only down side in being a cat are the hairballs.

I continued to work my way up the food chain, making quick progress. It's amazing what you can get done when you don't have to sleep. Dogs were fun. Especially the ones who barked at another dog barking without knowing why or the ones who chased their tails. It's interesting that for a lot of them, the whole man's best friend thing is a one-way street. Like vampires and other creatures, they do what they need to do in order to feed. Sometimes it involves fetching. So it's kind of understandable that they take special delight in watching their "owners" walk around with those little plastic bags filled with their droppings.

One day I decided to go to the zoo. It seemed like a good idea at the time. It started out fine enough. But then it all went horribly wrong. The gorillas couldn't handle it. I didn't think I was doing anything different than I had when I was in the other animals. I was just going along for the ride. But it was like they could almost sense I wasn't one of them. I would go in one and the others would suddenly start going ape poop. I was thrown from one gorilla into another and then another and at some point into the orangutans. By the end the whole lot of them had gone stark raving Renfield. (Who's *that*? C'mon now.)

I took shelter inside some sleeping buffalo for a while and then got out of there.

It occurred to me, perhaps as a result of the ape incident, that if something should happen to my *host* while I was in them, if they were to die, then I might die too. I had no

proof of this and it's not the kind of theory you want to test out—if you know what I mean—but I became quite certain of it. I had to be more careful.

Whether I was in an insect or animal, I learned that I could only stay inside for a few seconds at a time. I didn't bring along a stopwatch but the experience never lasted longer than a minute. I couldn't leave before time was up. There seemed to be no limit on how many things I could go into back-to-back, but I couldn't go back inside the same thing for at least a day.

And then one day I discovered something else.

I was inside a blue jay. I always wondered what exactly went through their heads when they were pecking away at some hard object. I found out. The answer: pretty much nothing. That's what they're *thinking*. So there I was, inside this dumb bird thinking I was the real dumb one for choosing to be here and wishing it would just stop. *Stop that stupid pecking and pounding*. And it did.

The bird stopped beating its pea brain again the tree. At first I thought it was a coincidence. So I tried something else. *Now fly over to that tree over there*, I thought. The bird actually looked over in the direction of the tree and… I was thrown clear. My time inside the bird was up.

I looked for another animal to slip inside so I could try to get them to do something unusual, so I would know that I was the one pulling the strings.

I followed a cat inside a house.

Let's stick our head in the toilet, I thought. I probably should have checked to see if the last person had flushed, but I was too excited. If I could get the cat to do this I would have proof that I was controlling the cat. (Fortunately for the cat and me, yes, the toilet had been flushed.)

We—me and the cat—jumped up on the toilet seat and plunged our head right down in the water. The shock was tremendous. It was so cold!

A split second later we were flying down the hall, bouncing off the walls. I exploded out of the cat.

I knew the cat's brain had to be screaming something like, "For the love of mice, what did I just do?"

It was a good question. It was also not a very nice thing to do to the cat. But I didn't care. I was too happy.

I had another skill! And this one held some real promise. I had no body but I had the power to control animals. It was a beginning.

Chapter Seven:
MORE OR LESS(ONS)

It was a beautiful, sunny day in late September. The bugs and tourists had gone wherever bugs and tourists go in late September. The paddle in my hand cut effortlessly through the water and I was filled with a sense of wonder and peace. There's nothing quite like canoeing down a lazy river on the Minnesota-Ontario border in autumn. The yellow and orange leaves danced—some for the last time—high above the water.

I saw it out the corner of my eye. A white wolf was watching me from the far bank. I stopped paddling and stared back. It howled.

Dracula was right, I thought. *That is some sweet music right there*.

A moment later the wolf dove in the water and began swimming toward me. The wolf's head was the only thing above water, and I could see its eyes focused on me with hateful purpose. There was something about those eyes. It was silly I know, but I was suddenly gripped with a dread that was as real as it was unexplainable. There was nothing to fear. I knew I could easily outdistance the wolf with a few strokes. And that's what I started doing.

I paddled steadily, keeping the canoe's bow straight. I looked back and could see the wolf getting smaller in the distance. I kept going.

When I turned back to take a look a few minutes later, I almost dropped my paddle. The wolf had somehow gained on me and was now just a few canoe lengths behind. I paddled furiously, churning the water behind me in great whirls of white.

My arms burned with effort and I quickly glanced back, sure that I would be rewarded. No. It couldn't be. It was incredible. The wolf was no more than a few feet away! Its evil eyes were blood red and it struck me at that moment where I had seen those eyes before. It was somewhere in another lifetime.

I knew that there was nothing I could do. The wolf was going to catch me. And it was going to kill me.

"No, Pork Pie!" I screamed. "No!"

The last thing I felt were the teeth ripping me open as the canoe became a great, red pool of…

Aaah!

Suddenly I was back in the library. Someone in front of me was reading a cooking magazine. I came to the slow realization that I had been dreaming. It had all seemed so real. Too real.

As I said, vampires don't dream. They don't have nightmares. But apparently those days were over. After not having them for 84 years, the nightmares began making up for lost time—with a vengeance.

So I guess technically this is another one of my *powers*. I suppose I'll go back to calling them nightmares now. Although *wake*mares might actually be a better term given my state. Since I don't sleep, they come at me when my eyes are wide open. It can be pretty scary. Imagine yourself doing some normal, everyday activity and suddenly having your mind transport you to a haunted house or the top of Mt. Everest during a killer snowstorm. If people could hear me, they'd think I was screaming for no reason. But they would be wrong. I have my reasons. Man, do I have my reasons.

Not surprisingly, I started having a recurring nightmare about the fire. I'd just be sitting there one moment and the next I'd be surrounded by flames with no chance of escape. There was nothing I could about them either. When you're asleep and you have a nightmare, all you have to do is wake up, open your eyes. But in my case, I already had my *eyes* open. There was nothing for me to do but wait until it passed.

When feeding is your prime concern as it is for a vampire, it's hard to just shut it off. Perhaps in part, that helps to explain what happened next.

My first human was at an ice cream shop. Like I said at the beginning, I think the taste of ice cream was one of my few human memories. I say I think because memories are hard to keep track of when you have human, vampire, and ghost vampire ones.

Anyway, I was floating past an ice cream shop and saw some people who really seemed to be enjoying themselves. I focused on one and went inside.

It was amazing! To actually taste food for the first time in more than 80 years… You can't imagine. *This ghost thing might not be so bad after all*, I thought.

All you can eat became my life. From fast food places to the finest restaurants. I ate all the things that I liked as a human and developed a taste for so many new ones. Seafood became one of my favorite things. Salmon. Tuna. Swordfish. Shrimp. Crab. Lobster. Wow.

It didn't take me long to develop a routine. In the morning it was the donut shops. Glazed. I would try the others, but always returned to the glazed. The afternoons were reserved for fast foods. Burgers, tacos, hotdogs, fries, sodas. At night I would experiment with different types of cuisine. Around the world stuff. Mexican. Italian. Oh, those gnocchi. Spicy. Brains exploding and running down the wall kind of heat. Thai. Ethiopian. Curries. Sushi. French. The French know their sauces, *garcon*, I'll tell you what. After midnight it was the all-day breakfast joints. Pancakes, waffles, eggs, sausage, and bacon till the sun came up. And then back to the coffee and donuts.

It might come as a surprise to you, but garlic became one of my obsessions. It really is quite delicious. It's one of life's little cruel jokes that vampires have to fear garlic. Have you ever had whole garlic cloves roasted in a little olive oil and sprinkled with sea salt and freshly ground pepper? No? Well, you should. It's so good, it's almost like dessert.

Another surprise, unrelated to food, was that being an adult was a huge disappointment. Not having grown up had always been one of my regrets. But I discovered that it was nothing like I had imagined. Responsibilities and obligations suck the fun out of being an adult faster than you can say, "Get a job." Your average adult is nothing more than a thinly-masked, overgrown child but has almost none of the fun connected with childhood.

Anyway, there I was, eating all the things I had missed during my vampire days. Humans are so epically fortunate. I would trade immortality for one slice of pepperoni pizza with the oil dripping down my chin. I would. (If I had a chin.)

From a human perspective, the great thing about "eating" this way is that you don't have to worry about gaining weight or stuff like cholesterol. And you don't get full, so you don't have to stop eating all the things you like.

But you do have to know how to pick the people. Unfortunately it can't just be about the food. My first piece of advice if you should ever find yourself in the same situation—like that's really going to happen, I know—is to stay away from the talkers. Those people who try to have a conversion while eating are the worst. You can't taste a thing. Another group to avoid is the *emotionals*. These people are completely useless if you're trying to taste something. This group is mostly made up of the sad and the stressed. But it can include anyone experiencing a strong emotion.

You could be "eating" the best thing in the world, but if your host isn't enjoying it, you might as well be shoving bull poop in your pie hole.

At some point I had the thought that if I could eat again maybe I could also play soccer again. I decided to try slipping into soccer players. For a few seconds at a time I was able to experience the game that I loved. I had to satisfy myself with the simple things: the grass below and the sky around, the wind in my face, the feel of the ball at my feet. And long-lost sensations like being out of breath and hearing the heart pounding in my chest. This was fine at first, but it didn't take long for frustration to set in.

The truth is that you humans as a whole are pretty awful soccer players. Slipping inside some sad excuse for a striker is not my idea of fun. So I had to be very selective about who I entered. As you might imagine, this took a lot of time. Not that I had much of anything else to do, except eat, but it wasn't the time that I minded. It was the pain.

Watching bad soccer is terrible torture.

There was only one thing to do: I had to begin controlling the players the way I could flies and birds and cats.

This wasn't easy. I only had a few seconds to work with and the talent pool wasn't exactly drowning in a sea of skill. But it was exactly what I needed: a challenge. It gave me balance and purpose. I now had eating and soccer to pass the time of my ghostly vampire existence. I would reward my hard-earned success on the soccer field with a trip to one of my favorite restaurants.

Watching player reactions was almost as much fun as playing the game again.

I discovered that my *ride* (as I started calling the people I entered) developed amnesia regarding the time when I was in control. They couldn't remember having done what they had done. (Or rather what I had done.)

So it became common to see a kid without a clue suddenly fake a defender out of his shorts and fire a shot into the back of the net and then not remember anything about it. The other kids would wonder how he had done it. Some would ask.

"Man, how did you do that?" one would say in amazement.

"Do what?" Clueless would say.

Sometimes this memory hole was misinterpreted.

"Don't be so full of yourself," the others would say.

When I came across a bad coach—and there are so many—I would take a few moments to actually try to teach the team something. That way at least I had a little more to work with the next time I played with or against those players.

So anyway that's pretty much how I spent my ghost vampire days. Playing soccer and eating. Eating and soccer. Soccer and eating. Hey, that sounds familiar. In a sense, my new existence was not all that different from the vampire years. I couldn't complain. Well, I suppose I could. But who would listen and what would that say about me?

You gotta take what they give you. The third rule of nature. And the bottom line was that my *life* was starting to feel less and less like Hell all the time.

Then one day something happened.

Chapter Eight:
THE GIRL WITH THE SAD FRENCH FRY EYES

There I was with my new best friend—the fat kid from the introduction—sucking away on a chocolate shake. The kid was the closest thing to a vampire I had found. We

were *blood* brothers, if you will. He would suck the life out of those shakes with a focus and single-mindedness that is exceptionally rare in humans. Humans are easily distracted. That's why they accomplish so little. I don't say that to sound superior either. Vampires are basically humans with a serious case of light sensitivity and dietary restrictions. Vampires are totally focused when it comes to blood. After that, though, they're just as distracted as humans.

Anyway, this kid was a real pleasure to eat with. And I could always count on him. He gave me some of the craziest exits I'd ever experienced too. I had found that the intensity of the experience had a direct connection to the force and violence of the casting out.

So whenever I left this sweet little shake sucker, I had to strap in for the crazy ride that usually followed. Of course, that's not exactly how it worked either. To get the most out of the experience, I had to be in the moment too. I couldn't be waiting for it to end. So when my time was over, it came as a shock to me. I'm not sure what I could do to prepare myself anyway, let alone avoid whatever might follow.

When an experience is intense enough, as with the gorillas, I am sometimes thrown into something or someone else.

So there we were sucking away on our old favorite, straight up chocolate, when my clock struck twelve. I was thrown clear across the room right into the girl who would change my life. Okay, for that to be technically true I would have to have a life. My existence then, at least.

A burger and fries sat in front of her. She looked out through the window. A hard rain was falling. *Eat*, I urged. *Eat*.

She picked up a fry and slowly placed it in her mouth. I immediately started secreting ghost vampire drool. I knew this place had the best fries in town. I waited for the taste to hit me. I waited. I waited and waited and waited, and it finally hit me. Nothing. I tasted nothing. Or rather I tasted pain and sorrow and hopelessness sprinkled with nothing.

This girl was more of a basket case than the little red plastic basket that the fries came in.

"Whoa," I screamed. "Get me out of here!"

This was one suffering succotash of a *saddie* right here, boy. A poster child for what you should avoid if you want to enjoy your food.

I tried to get the horrible non-taste out of my mouth by slipping into someone else. But it was no good. I went into back-to-back *stressees*. Ugh. I thought it best to quit while I was behind and decided to get back out to the soccer fields.

It was raining even harder and I knew the number of players to choose from would be cut way down, but that was all right. I loved playing in the rain. The mud kicking up all over the place. The water running down my face. The slickness of the ball and the extra long slide tackles through the wet grass. The raindrops clinging to the net until a blistering shot sent them scattering. There was nothing like it.

There was one team out there practicing dribbling around orange cones.

"Is there anything as boring as going around these little cones?" I said.

I did my best to have some fun. Watching the coach get mad because his players are doing whatever I want them to do is usually good for a laugh. But my mind started to wander. I started thinking about ice cream cones instead of those bloody soccer cones. And then I started thinking about that girl.

Chapter Nine:
THE TASTE OF NOTHING

I spent most of November playing indoor soccer. The fall outdoor leagues had ended and heavy rains had turned the fields into muddy lakes and squishy quagmires.

I had never liked indoor much. It never struck me as real. The enclosed, confined space in which it was played went against the first law of the beautiful game: soccer is played outdoors.

But since I now had only seconds to work with given my condition, I started to appreciate what the game had to offer. It moved faster. My mind had to be quicker, sharper. The walls added another element. It was like soccer meets pinball.

I had started to refer to the time and distance covered and spent inside one person as an *inning*, to borrow a term from another sport. And with indoor I was able to make more out of those few, precious seconds, those innings, than I was at an outdoor field.

Still, as much as I tried to like it and appreciate its advantages, it felt like playing a video game. Don't get me wrong. I love video games. I like those western, shoot 'em up, cowboy games an awful lot. Maybe it's because by the time I was born, the West was just a memory. More recent than now, but still a memory. My favorites are the soccer games though. But at the end of the day, no matter how well you master the controls and how much fun you are having, there was no escaping the fact that you are not playing the real thing.

To make up for my lack of time outdoors, I started going to the track. Running is much less frustrating than soccer. It usually doesn't give you the highs of soccer, but it doesn't supply most of the pain either. It is also easier to find a good runner than a good soccer player. It is a simpler activity. In a way it's purer. You don't have to be the best or the fastest. All eyes aren't focused on the ball. There is no ball. Everyone runs his or her race. Sometimes there isn't even a race.

Anyway, it was nice to jump from runner to runner and just keep the momentum going. Turning in circles, going nowhere. It's a strangely peaceful activity. When running is done right, sometimes the mind just leaves. It's like a mini vacation from all the nonsense we spend most of our lives thinking about. That nonsense part is true for humans, vampires, and ghosts.

Another great thing about running is the appetite that follows. Even though I only spend a few seconds inside people, sometimes the feelings I experience can linger for several minutes. There's nothing like a hot meal following the satisfaction and chill that sets in after a long run on a rainy November day.

I was in the mood for Italian.

I had been on a bad streak, not being able to enjoy eating for a few days. It seemed that all the people I entered weren't really able to taste what they were eating. I started being more selective. Sometimes doing your homework can pay off. But no matter how much I studied and how certain I was that I had selected the right eater, the results were the same: stale cardboard.

This went on for another week.

And at some point I hit upon a theory. Or it hit me. It wasn't the rides that were stressed or sad or distracted. It was me. I realized that I had been spending more and more time thinking about that sad girl with the bland French fries. Whether I was running, reading, playing indoor soccer, or eating, she was there.

She had somehow cursed me, poisoned my ghost vampire taste buds. I didn't sense that it had been malicious or on purpose. But the results were the same. I also somehow knew I would not be able to enjoy food again until I did something about it.

I wondered about what had caused her suffering and if there was something I could do to ease her pain. This kind of thinking was all new to me. Looking at a human as anything other than a food source was definitely not in my vampire DNA. As I said earlier, I've had more than my share of unproud moments but I never considered myself evil. Sure, I have been selfish and guilty of thinking solely of myself for as long as I can remember. Still, I never went out of my way to hurt someone. (Just *borrowed* some of their blood from time to time is all.) By the same token though, I never ever went out of my way to help anyone either.

But now here I was, thinking about helping this sad girl.

This was crazy. My ghost vampire brain must be rotting! Maybe she didn't even have a real problem. Maybe she was just moody. After all, there's no shortage of humans or vampires that have lost their grip on perspective. Maybe she was the type of person who made mountains out of molehills. Maybe I was imagining the whole thing and was just having a really bad eating streak.

In any case, before I could help her—if that was even physically possible—I had to find out what was bothering her. And before I could do that, I had to find her again.

Chapter Ten:
IN SEARCH OF

I started hanging around that diner where we had first shared and tasted nothing together. I was there day and night. I wasn't sure I would even be able to recognize her. I didn't exactly know what she looked like. Pretty much all I could remember was the blandness of the fries and the depth of her pain. Not much to go on right there.

I'm not sure how much time passed. Time had pretty much lost all meaning for me and I had stopped keeping score except, of course, for having memorized the operating hours of all my favorite restaurants. I was trapped between what I guessed was a sort of eternity and those few fleeting seconds when I was able to go inside someone and feel alive.

I remember that it was right around the time when I had stopped looking at necks with the eyes of a vampire. For so long an obsession, they were now just another body part. I remember that Christmas decorations had started going up.

And then there she was.

I'm not sure how I knew it was her. But I did. Sadness still clung to her like dumb on a bag of hammers. She was with another girl. They were talking. I listened.

"How's your dad doing?" the other girl asked.

"Being in jail is terrible," Sadness said. "But I think the part that is killing him is that people would actually think he would do such a thing."

"I know what you mean," the other girl said. "Your dad would be the last guy to burn down his own business. It doesn't make any sense."

"They're just looking at the numbers, Lisa," Sadness said. "The numbers make sense. My dad's company was losing a lot of money. And some people in that situation take the easy way out and try to collect on the insurance. But the arson is nothing compared to the murder charge."

Murder? Wow, this guy was in deep. Whether he had done it or not almost didn't matter. The cops had their man. And when the cops have their man it's like a dog with a bone or, well, a vampire with a neck. They don't just forget about it and let go.

This was serious. I wondered what I thought I would be able to do.

Chapter Eleven:
GHOST VAMPIRE, PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

Well at least I now knew where she lived. And I learned her name. Aubrey. Her friend called her Bree. She was 14. Her mother had died two years earlier. She was an only child. Since her father had been denied bail, she was staying with Lisa and her family.

I learned that during the fire a homeless man had been killed. He was sleeping in the building at the time. The police didn't believe that Aubrey's father had killed the man intentionally. Quite the opposite. They were convinced that the dead man had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time when John Portifoy had allegedly set the fire. But since the victim died during the arson, the charge was automatically kicked up to murder.

This meant that if Aubrey's father was found guilty, he could get the death penalty.

I now knew the cause of her terrible sadness. She wasn't just someone in a bad mood. This was serious. Deadly and deathly serious.

All the evidence pointed to her father. The police had no other suspects. They didn't need any. Portifoy fit the crime like a glove that fit like a glove. I'm talking about a really, really good-fitting glove. His lawyer didn't have a clue as to how to begin building a defense. The best he could come up with was to plead guilty and hope that the judge gave Portifoy life instead of the death penalty.

After going more than 80 years without as much as helping one little old lady across the street, I was now going to try to help someone beat a murder rap. No big thing.

In the next few days I familiarized myself with the facts of the case.

John Portifoy owned a clothing company specializing in personalized Hawaiian-style shirts. Each shirt was made to order for each client and was quite expensive. Financial records showed that when the bottom dropped out of the economy, the bottom dropped out of John Portifoy's business. There was what the police termed "undisputed" evidence that the fire had been set intentionally. There were reliable witnesses placing Portifoy near the building shortly before the fire. Portifoy did not have an alibi and admitted he had been there at the time in question.

Portifoy rented a large space at an outdoor mall called The Shops at Frank's Landing. A fact that tightened the noose around Portifoy's neck was that he had recently increased

the amount of the insurance coverage for his shirts to well over two million dollars in case of theft or *fire*.

Like all good detectives, I went back to the scene of the crime. Despite what they said in the novels and movies though, I couldn't see how that would help. What could I find that the police had overlooked? But that was the wrong attitude, wasn't it? I was a ghost vampire after all. A ghost vampire with special powers.

I would look at everything connected to the case with fresh eyes. With fresh, 97-year-old ghost vampire eyes. Wait. Didn't I say I had no eyes? Well, be that as it may, there had to be something the police had missed.

There was something vaguely familiar about the place. I suppose if you've seen one mall, you've pretty much seen them all. Most of the shops were housed within a main building. There were a few detached structures however: a bank, a tire store, a printing/copy store, and Portifoy's shop. This struck me as odd. Why would Portifoy need such a large space for a shirt store? But I learned later that the mall was having trouble leasing it out, so they gave him a deal. He was actually paying less than he would have for a much smaller space within the main building.

The shell still stood, but the inside was completely gutted. It was all black and gray and charred through and through. There were still a few small puddles here and there from when the firefighters had put out what was left of the place. They had been too late. By the time they arrived at the scene, it was basically mop-up work, a training exercise.

According to the arson investigator, the fire had started in the back of the store. Gasoline had been used, so there was zero chance that it had been an accident. I looked around at the destruction.

People were coming out of the coffee place across the way with their anything-but-coffee drinks. Fake Christmas music filled the air. A security guard was talking to one of the countless mommies pushing a stroller.

I had been right. There was nothing here.

Portifoy's only defense would seem to be that no one would be so stupid. But since there is no shortage of stupid people in the world, this argument rarely swayed a jury. (This is surprising since juries seem to mostly be made up of stupid people.)

The painfully bad music led me to think of a Christmas goose. That bird carried me to the observation that another casualty of the fire appeared to be Portifoy's own *goose*. It seemed thoroughly cooked. Sadly for me, my chances of enjoying a Christmas goose or any other meal were getting smaller by the second.

Over the next few weeks, life didn't get any easier for Aubrey. Her father's lawyer kept pushing for a guilty plea. He basically had no defense. School became a burden. Students and teachers were nice enough, but she could hear the whispers and see it in their faces. She might as well be walking around, she thought, with it written in red lipstick across her forehead: "Arsonist's Daughter."

One afternoon she went over to her house to pick up some clothes. There were the usual family pictures. A girl was smiling in many of them. I almost didn't recognize her. It struck me that I had never seen Aubrey smile.

At some point I felt I should give her some hope. It was a dumb move. I had no reason to expect that her father would be found anything other than guilty. But the level

of her suffering was such that I broke down like a little girl. Which is to say, like a 97-year-old teenage ghost vampire.

I slipped inside someone with a phone and texted her.

"Am trying to help your dad. Meet me at Dockery Park tomorrow at 4 p.m.," I wrote.

I'm not sure what I was going to tell her. I could tell her that things looked bleak. But she already knew that.

I thought about not showing up. But there was no going back now. I had to show up, and I had to come up with something.

I could try to talk to her by going in and out of people and using them to speak for me. But that would be a tad too freakish.

Hi, I'm a ghost. That's right, just one ghost not one of many like you might think from all the different people coming up to you. Anyway, I can possess people, hence all these people, and oh, by the way, I'm going to get your father out of jail.

No, that was not going to fly. I had to think of something else.

I decided to write her a letter. I headed to the library and found someone with a piece of paper and a pencil. It wasn't easy and if I had been capable of feeling tired I would have been exhausted halfway through. I would have one person write a few lines and then pass the letter and pencil on to another. It went on like this until I was finished. But that was the easy part. Now I had to get the letter to the park.

This was no big thing as long as there were enough people around. It was just like passing a baton to the next runner in a relay race. However, problems arose when the number of people thinned out. Sometimes a person was still hanging on to the letter when my inning was up. Since I couldn't go back inside the same person again, I had to have someone new take the letter from them. This produced some nervous moments.

"Come back here with that!" someone would say as they ran after the thief. When the victim caught up—and this happened more than once—neither person could explain what it was that was stolen or why it was taken. While the two argued I had a third person run up and take the letter. You can see where this could get out of hand pretty fast. Eventually the chasers grew to the size of a small mob. All that was missing were clubs and pitchforks. I barely managed to avoid capture on more than one occasion.

At some point I decided that the whole idea was beyond stupid. But by then I was far enough along that I thought I might as well see it through.

I finally made it to the park with the letter a little after 3:30. I found a dry spot under a tree and placed a rock over it so it wouldn't blow away. I waited.

Aubrey showed up and started looking for me. Good luck with that. I had a squirrel drop the letter at her feet like it had picked it up by mistake, confusing it for a nut. (Not so far fetched if you consider the source.)

Aubrey picked up the piece of paper. For the briefest of moments I sensed her sadness slightly lift.

I'm responsible for that! I thought with pride. But then the realization quickly followed that I would have to fan and feed that spark of hope with something of substance. *I'm responsible for that*, I thought more somberly.

She started reading the strange ransom-looking letter, written in several different handwritings.

Dear Aubrey,

This is strange for me. I know it will be for you. My name is Harry Wilson. I heard about your father and want to help. I'm not sure what I can do, but I will do my best.

Please don't lose hope. I will be in touch. It is not easy for me to communicate, so be patient.

Yours truly,

H

I watched her, looking for a reaction. She folded up the paper and put it in her pocket. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. That made two of us because I couldn't tell what I was thinking either. I didn't have a clue. I watched her walk away. The sun went down. I was in the dark.

In more ways than one.

Chapter Twelve:
OF GOOSES AND NOOSES

Since I had started working on the case, my nightmares had grown worse. Especially the one about the fire. I suppose this shouldn't have come as a great surprise, but it was nevertheless terrifying.

And each new dream felt more real and horrible than the last. I had to keep my focus. I reminded myself that Aubrey and her father were also heading toward a not so different kind of nightmare. A nightmare they would not be able to wake up from either.

The trial was less than two weeks away. John Portifoy's attorney was a broken record. His entire strategy amounted to nothing more than trying to convince his client to plead guilty. I can't say I disagreed. Portifoy didn't want to, but I went inside once and could feel that he was close to going along with it. Very close. He would do it for Aubrey. He told himself that having a live father in prison would be better for her than no father at all.

Aubrey had mixed emotions on the subject as well. The lawyer didn't inspire any confidence. A not guilty plea felt like a sure ticket to the gas chamber. But she hated the idea of her father admitting to something she knew he hadn't done and then having to spend the rest of his life in prison.

As I said earlier, the whole thing was a mess. I did say that earlier, didn't I? Well, I'm saying it now. The whole thing was a mess.

Back to the facts. The cause of the fire had been arson. The perpetrator had been sloppy, leaving plenty of clues. Portifoy admitted to having been at the building minutes before the fire started.

I knew that John Portifoy had not done it. I went inside him on more than one occasion and immediately picked up on that. He carried the same terrible sadness I found in his daughter. He was also filled with confusion as to who had really set the fire.

We had the same questions. If he had not set the fire, who had? And why? If I could answer that *why* it might lead to the *who*.

What would be the motive? There were two logical possibilities: someone other than John Portifoy stood to gain from the fire or it had been a frame job by someone who had it in for Portifoy. There was also the chance that it had been a random act without a clear

motive. I hoped that this wasn't the case because it would be even more difficult to prove than the first two.

Since it had been losing money in record numbers, John Portifoy's business did not pose any threat to his competitors. Portifoy did not seem to have any enemies. Certainly no one who would go to such lengths to get back at him for some real or imagined wrong.

I decided to focus on who else besides Portifoy had something to gain from the fire. I thought about the owner of the mall. Did he have something at stake? Ouch, poor choice of words. Okay, did he have something to gain?

The police and insurance investigators had checked him out and found nothing. Financial records didn't provide any clues as to why he would want to burn down his own building. He actually ended up losing money when it went up in flames.

Still, having nothing else going on, I decided to pay him a visit.

He had an office at Frank's Landing. His name was Frank Gilroy. I quickly *detected* that he had most likely named the mall after himself. I suppose we all need something to feel proud of. He was smoking a cigarette. I went inside.

"Oh, yeah," Gilroy was thinking as he took a long drag. "Smoke in lungs feel so soothing, *so* good. Oh, yeah."

The guy was clearly in love. In almost 100 years, I had never thought too much about smoking. Way back in my human days, some of my friends smoked. At the time there wasn't all the proof there is now about how they will kill you, but to me it just seemed like kind of a silly activity. And later, well, it's not really a vampire thing if you think about it. But the depth of his feeling made me wonder whether I had missed out.

"Oh, yeah," Gilroy went on. "*So* good."

A voice inside my head told me there was something about him, something not quite right. He grabbed a briefcase and headed for the door. I followed, thinking he was going home. But he stopped at the racetrack instead.

He could have bought his own stable of horses with the money he lost. I got bored and decided to run in one of the races.

I did some math and figured out roughly at what point I would need to enter the first horse in order to run the longest race possible and still have one horse left to cross the finish line.

I could hear the announcer and feel the whip crack on my quarters. I thought about throwing a jockey or two off my back but stayed focus. I tried not to interfere with the outcome, choosing to just experience it without controlling any of the horses.

Just as I had always suspected, horses are basically nuts. Sure, a few of them have a nice, easygoing disposition. But most of them are just plain insane.

"Carrots are good. Good are carrots."

"Me want sugar cube."

"My butt itches something awful."

"The square root of 144 crazy horses is 12 dead jockeys."

The race was exciting as much from the running as from the deranged things that went through the horses' heads. It was, as they say, *one nutty ride*.

Gilroy was still losing when the races ran out. He went home to his nice, big house. This guy could probably afford to lose more than a little money from time to time.

After spending several hours with him, I still wasn't able to reach any conclusions. There was something off about him, but I couldn't put my finger on it. The fact that he

went to the track didn't mean anything. Thousands of people bet on horses without burning down their own buildings. I didn't have enough to consider him a suspect. But I also didn't have enough to cross him off the list. I decided to stick with him until a better idea came along.

I hadn't been able to find one shred of evidence to suggest John Portifoy didn't do it. I knew I had to raise some questions in jurors' minds. I had to create a reasonable doubt. But so far the only doubts I had—and they were huge—were concerning my ability to do any good.

I needed a break. As I said, I never get tired. But I do get bored. So I headed over to an old hockey rink where I played my indoor soccer.

It felt good to run and sweat and kick and score. I realized I had been working on the case 24/7. I needed to take more breaks. Maybe I would even take a vacation after the trial. It takes a maximum effort for a vampire to travel. Our range is usually limited to how far we can get during the night. Beyond that it gets complicated. Complicated and dangerous. There are so many places I've read about over the years that I never got the chance to visit. Believe it or not, I've never been to Europe or Asia. I've been to Mexico, Canada, and Jamaica. One of these days, I would have to expand that list. *Ya, mon*.

I tried to eat something—jerk chicken, as a matter of fact—but it was no use. I went to visit Aubrey. It was late. She was trying to read a book about zombies. It didn't seem half bad. She cried herself to sleep as I hovered in the corner wishing there was something I could do or say.

Maybe I should tell her I'm a ghost, I thought. That might give her hope. People today are much more understanding of such things than in the past. And if she went with that, it would be reasonable to expect that I had supernatural powers. It would also be reasonable to expect that she would conclude that I was as crazy as a horse or a hatter (at the very least). Or that she was losing it. Yes, but if I tell her I'm a ghost *vampire* then all would be right with her world. That definitely wouldn't register on the mad hatter/nutty horse meter. Oh, indeed. Not.

I decided to keep thinking about it.

I hung out with Gilroy for the next week with nothing to show for it. The guy still wasn't right, but he wasn't wrong either. He visited the track twice more. He kept losing but didn't seem to care. All he really seemed to care about were his cigarettes.

Thanksgiving had come and gone. Christmas was knocking on the door. I kept my eyes on the prize and tried not to think about all the awesome food I was missing out on. If I could somehow fix this thing and get Aubrey to smile, every day would go back to being Thanksgiving. *That's one big turkey of an "if" right there, boy,* I caught myself thinking on more than one occasion. What I needed was a big wishbone to break my way.

I had the lead detective on Portifoy's case order a polygraph test. The results could not be used in court, but my thinking was that if Aubrey's dad had some sympathy from the cops, they might start looking in a different direction, even at this late date. The defense attorney went along. It couldn't do any harm.

Portifoy passed.

But when the results were brought to the detective, he broke out of his rage cage.

"Who ordered this?" he shouted.

When he was told that he had, this made him even angrier.

"Do not lie to me!" he screamed. "I'll make YOU take the test!"

When he saw his signature on the paperwork, he suddenly became quiet and slumped down in his chair.

"Must be working too hard," he whispered.

A few of the cops felt bad when they realized they might have the wrong guy, but it was out of their hands now. The trial was just a few days away and, like me, they had nothing that would point them in a new direction.

It had been a while and I decided I needed to communicate with Aubrey again to tell her I was still on the case. I knew better than anyone how little that really amounted to, but I didn't want her to think I had jumped a sinking ship. (Ghost vampires can't drown, can they?)

I had nothing to report, so I had to be hopefully vague. Or vaguely hopeful.

Instead of relying on another relay team of writers and messengers, I decided to find a really fast typist this time. Then I sent her an email.

I raced over to her house, hoping to get there before she read it. I wanted to see her reaction.

Dear Aubrey,

I hope you weren't thinking that I'd forgotten about you or your father. I think the lie detector results are a step in the right direction.

I need to ask a favor of you: I need you to keep an open mind. My methods are not conventional. In fact, nothing about me is conventional. I hope I can explain it to you some day, perhaps over fries and a chocolate shake.

I will have some news for you soon.

Your friend,

H

It seemed to help a little. I know it helped me. Thinking that one day I might again be able to enjoy a chocolate shake with Aubrey and that fat kid. It's the little things that keep us going.

Chapter Thirteen:
I SHUDDER TO THINK

The trial started. I had failed and found nothing. The prosecution presented its case in two hours. The "defense" took two minutes and most of that time was taken up by long pauses between sentences.

The jury came back in record time.

To no one's surprise, John Portifoy was found guilty. The judge sentenced him to death. He was executed three years later.

Aubrey was never the same. She dropped out of school and turned to drugs and the streets. I never tried to help anyone else, and I never tasted another chocolate shake for the rest of eternity. The rest of eternity…

Noooo! How could I have let all this happen? How could I—

Ugh. Another nightmare.

That one right there was a doozy. It almost made me sick to my stomach. Good thing I don't have one anymore.

I couldn't shake it.

(Now, why didn't I go for that one? It was so easy and so obvious. You were sure I was going to say, "I couldn't *chocolate* shake it." Touché for you. You're absolutely right, that would have been a good one. I suppose the whole thing was getting to me.)

The dream left me feeling like maybe it wasn't just a nightmare. Maybe it was a premonition, a vision of what was to come, a Ghost of Christmas Future to end all futures. The only positive thing I could take from it was that it hadn't happened yet.

But *yet* was getting smaller and shrinking with every passing day. Pretty soon you'd need a microscope to see it.

I went to Gilroy's.

He was sitting at his desk looking out the window and holding a cigarette in his right hand. He looked down at the burning tip and made goo-goo eyes. I took a long shot. I slipped inside.

"Look at the evidence that proves I set the fire," I commanded.

Gilroy hesitated, scratched his head, and just stared at his cigarette. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a box of matches.

"No, the fire at Frank's Landing," I instructed.

Gilroy looked around the room, lost and helpless. He was a kitten stuck high up in a very tall tree.

He had nothing. He didn't have any evidence because he had not set the fire. I had lost more than a week chasing a dead end. Looking back on it, I'm not sure what I was hoping to find. Why hadn't I just asked him this a week ago?

"I'm so stupid!" I shouted as I left the house. The words rattled and echoed around in my tiny brain. "I'm so stuuupid, stuuupid, stuuupid…"

I went back to the mall. It takes some doing to give a vampire the creeps, but this place was getting the job done. I wasn't sure why.

Desperate now, I began trying out my *brilliant* new investigatory technique on others. I went inside several of the shop owners and employees.

"Show me the proof," I said. "Who's the true arsonist around here?"

I came up with nothing. Like Gilroy and me, these people didn't know anything either. I had no idea how that tree was still standing with the weight of all those kittens.

It was time for a break. If not for a break in the case, a break from the case. A soccer break.

I told myself I would stop when I scored two dozen. The indoor game moved so fast that sometimes I would be able to put in two goals in one inning. I tore into the ball, trying to release some of my frustrations. Poof, poof, poof! The ball and that poor net were never the same again.

Back to the mall. The sun had gone down. I still had a few people to cross off my list. Of course at this point my *list* might as well have been the phone book.

More employees, the maintenance department, delivery guys, security. They all added up to nothing. And then I had a thought. I had missed the dayshift guard. I had someone look up his name and address.

Lester Fennimore lived in a small, rundown house with his large poodle. He was watching a college basketball game when I got there. The silly looking dog was in the backyard.

"Look at the evidence that proves I set the fire," I commanded, feeling real dumb. It was a feeling I was growing quite familiar with. *Stupid* and me were becoming best buds. I mean, what was I going to do? Go into every single man, woman, and child in the city and ask them how they did it? Yeah, *stupid* and me were like this. (If you can't see me, I'm crossing my fingers.)

And then something incredible happened.

Lester Fennimore dug into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys. He went over to a desk and unlocked the bottom drawer. He pulled out a manila folder and opened it. He scattered the newspaper clippings on the desk. He looked down at them like some people look at baby pictures or like Gilroy looked at his cigarettes. He was all warm inside.

I scanned the stories quickly, pushing my vampire speed-reading powers to their limits. They all had to do with fires. Arsons to be precise. All unsolved and unconnected, from what I could tell. There were more than 20 accounts from all around the country. A large wave of pride swelled up inside Fennimore.

Here it was. Proof. I had proof. Lester Fennimore had set the fire! He had set all these fires. I couldn't wait to tell Aubrey. I couldn't wait to get the information into the hands of the defense attorney. And I couldn't wait to taste that shake. Suddenly, before I could put the stories back, I was thrown clear. If I had a body, it would have bounced off the wall. Or maybe gone through it.

I looked back at Fennimore. His eyes danced from the stories, around the room, and back down to the desk. A confused, scared look swallowed his face. But confusion and fear turned to anger and he gathered the clippings into a tight ball. Then he walked over to the fireplace.

"No!" I shouted in my loudest ghost vampire voice. "No!"

He threw the wad into the fire. There was nothing I could do. Wait, the dog! I raced out to the backyard and entered the poodle. I shot through the opening in the kitchen door, almost forgetting to duck, and sprinted into the living room. It was too late. The dog and I watched the fire burn, orange and blue and red and white and black and gray.

Here was the proof that would save John Portifoy's life going up in smoke. I had been so close.

And now I had nothing.

Well, not exactly nothing. I told myself I could cry about it later. So after the briefest spell of sad, brooding, ghost vampire disappointment in history, I focused on the fact that I now knew who had really set the fire. The proof was gone, ashes to ashes and all that, but maybe I could find more evidence. There had to be more evidence out there somewhere.

But time was running out. The trial was set to start tomorrow. It did not promise to be a long trial either. The whole thing was just going to be a formality.

Since it was such an open-and-shut case, even the formalities sped along at vampire speed. The opening arguments were brief. The prosecution began presenting its case. They didn't have much, but it was enough. More than enough. The look on the jurors' and judge's faces left no doubt. John Portifoy was a dead man.

I toyed with the idea of breaking him out of jail. I was fairly certain I could pull it off but the ultimate success of the plan would fall on Portifoy. Would he go for it? Would he want to live the rest of his life on the run, a fugitive from justice the way I had been a fugitive from the light all those years?

John Portifoy did not strike me as that kind of man.

I had to play by the rules—within reason—and go with what I had. What I had amounted to the knowledge that Fennimore had committed the crime. Without proof, that knowledge would have been useless in the hands of a normal person. Trapped inside me, it was beyond pointless.

Chapter Fourteen:
A REAL SCREAM

There was no time left to find more evidence even if it existed somewhere out there, so I had to create it myself. (That's playing by the rules, isn't it?) And I had to do it fast. But what would it take?

A confession, I thought.

I could get Fennimore to write one easily enough. But he would deny it. He'd say someone forced him to write it. (Sort of true.) The judge might throw it out before the jury could even see it.

I could also try to get him to confess on his own. But that could be tricky and I was pressed for time. I decided I would start with the written confession and see about Plan B later.

The letter had to create enough doubt first with the judge and then in the jury to force a not guilty verdict. I drafted one in my head and then I was ready.

In the few short seconds I would have, I had to make sure Fennimore had paper, wrote and signed the letter, and then hid it where he wouldn't see it.

Fortunately, he was home. It was snowing and he had a fire going. It must have been seeing that fire that triggered the nightmare.

Suddenly I was back in that room. It was filling up with smoke and getting hot. The wood was popping and crackling. The flames were closing in all around. Blisters on the palms of my hands. I was like an animal. I didn't understand. All I knew was panic and pain. The pain. The terrible pain. I could hear myself screaming. But I wasn't the only one. There was someone else crying out.

And then through the screams and the smoke and the flames and the suffering, I saw him. It was Fennimore. I suddenly understood.

That's where I had been. I was sleeping in *that* building when the fire started. That homeless man wasn't the only one who died in the inferno. I had died in it too. Lester Fennimore had killed me!

I flew around the room in a rage. I had never thought about the cause of my fire. Had never wondered if it was an accident or something else. It didn't seem to matter much. I

was dead. That was the point. But I was taken completely by surprise by this discovery. Just like the fire itself, I never saw it coming. I came very close at that moment to going inside Fennimore and giving him a taste of his own medicine. More than a taste.

"Jump in the fire, you son of a BITCH!" I shouted over and over and over again.

I don't know how long I went on like this and I don't know how I managed not to go inside him. I didn't care about anything else at that moment but seeing Fennimore burn. Even if it meant I would burn again too and—if my theory was correct—disappear.

All the time, Fennimore just sat there, oblivious.

I knew I had to calm down. But I no longer processed emotions as a human or a vampire. Vampires tend to run a little cool, not letting too many things get to us. We have to stay focused on the main objective after all. And no matter how angry, even the most hot-blooded humans eventually run out of steam. I no longer had either of those advantages. I felt as if I could hold on to this rage for the rest of forever.

"Jump in the fire, you son of a BITCH!" I continued to scream.

If you could have heard me, I imagine I must have sounded a little like George C. Scott.

And for some reason, that thought started to calm me down.

I thought of Aubrey. I thought of Aubrey crying herself to sleep. I thought of chocolate shakes. I thought of Ronaldinho dancing over the ball.

I was starting to regain my senses.

I went over Fennimore's confession in my mind.

I took a deep breath. (Of course I didn't actually take a deep breath. But since it's something you might do under similar circumstances, I threw it in, the better for you to relate. No extra charge.) I went inside.

Fennimore took out a piece of paper and grabbed a pen. He started writing. He then signed the letter, folded it, and slid it under the desk pad. A second later I flew out, relieved and disgusted.

Now I had to get the letter to John Portifoy's attorney.

By the time I made it back, people were leaving the courtroom. I learned that the prosecution had finished presenting its case. Tomorrow the defense would have its turn. At most it would take the case up to lunch. I didn't have a moment to lose. The letter was still back at Fennimore's house. I had to get it to the lawyer before morning.

Aubrey smiled weakly at her father. I had never seen her look so sad. And sad is pretty much the only way I'd seen her.

I went into a nearby reporter and scribbled a quick note. I handed it to her.

"Someone told me to give you this," the reporter said.

Aubrey,
I'm very close now. Will have evidence by tomorrow.
H

Aubrey looked around the almost empty courtroom. I rushed back to Fennimore's house.

First I needed to get the letter out of the house. Then it had to make its way to Morris Tupper, John Portifoy's lawyer. I had learned that the more people who were out on the street the better it was for such things. And sooner would be better than later.

Fennimore wasn't home yet. I had the poodle stand up on its hind legs and take the letter. It bounded out to the backyard and ran straight at the six-foot high fence. The poodle and I flew through the air and cleared the top of the wall by half an inch. We missed hitting a man walking out on the sidewalk by about the same distance.

"What the—" the man yelled.

The letter dropped at his feet.

He picked it up and started running. Three people later, the letter made it to the bus stop. It waited in someone's pocket until the bus came. I stuck it between the seat and the side of the bus. The confession transferred onto two more buses and finally made it to the stop closest to Tupper's house.

At one point there was a slight problem when a toddler got his hands on the letter. A woman had to take it from him and the child's mother raised a stink.

"What did you just take from my son?" the mother yelled as the boy cried and threw a fit.

An old man eventually knocked on the lawyer's door and delivered the letter. Tupper looked down at the dog-drooled, manhandled piece of paper in his hand.

"What am I doing here?" the old man said a moment later.

Tupper closed the door without saying a word and took the letter over to a chair. He sat down and read it several times. He was excited—up until that moment he basically had no case—but soon figured out the letter by itself might not be enough. He called another lawyer to ask for advice.

Fennimore would have to take the stand, she told him. He would have to confess or at least raise some serious suspicions.

Tupper then called the judge. The judge wasn't happy about being disturbed at home and by the last-minute nature of the request, but he finally agreed to issue a subpoena to get Fennimore to testify.

Tupper wasn't sure he could get a full confession out of Fennimore but hoped to at least introduce a defense attorney's best friend into the proceedings—the *D* word: doubt.

Having a written confession but then having the person deny everything in court would certainly confuse things, but it probably wouldn't get John Portifoy off the hook. And I knew Fennimore would deny everything. There was still no proof that he had set the fire. And there was no time to have the police investigate Fennimore to see if they could connect him to the other fires. There was only one thing to do: I had to make sure he confessed and I had to make it look believable.

I couldn't just go inside Fennimore and confess and then have him claim his innocence a minute later. That might make him appear insane, but not necessarily an arsonist and a murderer. I had to make it stick. The confession had to come from Fennimore.

It's a good thing I no longer slept because on this night I wouldn't have been able to get any anyway. And I figured if I wasn't going to get any sleep, Fennimore shouldn't either. I went back to his house.

I had to wear him down without pushing him over the edge. I started by having all the animals in the neighborhood take turns acting demented. The woodpeckers would bang away at the walls and roof. The cats would meow and crash off his windows. The dogs would bark and howl and express themselves in other ways on the doormat outside his front door and then ring the doorbell. (Nice touch, don't you think?)

Then I used people.

I couldn't come out and accuse him. That would make him run. It had to be subtle.

People called up introducing themselves as I.P. Freeley or asking if he had "Prince Albert in a can" or saying, "Buenas no cheese, do you know if it will be hot tamale?"

After a while, he left the phone off the hook.

After that they started knocking on his front door and then running away.

"The whole world's gone batty," Fennimore said to his poodle. "Batty, I tell you."

He was half right, I suppose. The whole world had gone ghost batty. As in ghost vampire.

It was five in the morning. Lester Fennimore was ready.

Chapter Fifteen:
HORSE MEAT

The sun had pretty much lost any ability to give off heat. It was just one more Christmas light now. The morning was clear and cold and the snow was beginning to harden into ice. Over the prosecution's weak objection, the judge had adjourned the court until 10:30 in order to give the defense enough time to present their one witness.

Lester Fennimore showed up looking a little tired but in control of his emotions. He had been too smart to run. Plus, he knew that Portifoy's lawyer was just going through the motions and that there was no evidence connecting him to this or any of the other fires.

"The defense calls to the stand Lester Morgan Fennimore," Morris Tupper said proudly. "We would also like to enter this letter into the record and have it marked *Defense Exhibit A*."

Fennimore walked confidently to the stand. When the bailiff asked him to swear to tell the whole truth, he said, "Most certainly."

Tupper began asking Fennimore innocent-sounding questions about the morning of the fire. Where he was and what he had seen. Tupper then handed Fennimore the letter and asked him to read it.

"I, Lester M. Fennimore, being of sound mind and body, hereby confess to the following crimes:

That I did knowingly and intentionally set the fire at The Shops at Frank's Landing on August 19, 20—"

Fennimore let the letter fall out of his hand.

"This is a lie," he said in a calm voice. "I didn't write this."

"That's not your handwriting and signature?" the lawyer asked.

The bailiff picked the letter off the floor and handed it back to Fennimore. Then he leaned in.

"We know you set those other fires," the bailiff whispered in his ear. "And we know you set this one."

Fennimore's eyes widened slightly, but he maintained his composure.

"That's not your handwriting and signature?" the lawyer repeated.

"Well, yes, it looks like my writing, but I didn't write it," Fennimore said now squinting back at the bailiff.

"If you didn't write, who did?" Tupper asked.

"I don't know, maybe you wrote it," Fennimore said looking from Tupper to the judge to the jury. "The only way I would write something like that is if someone were holding a gun to my head, because it's all lies."

Fennimore was convincing. I looked over at the jurors and could tell they were buying it. This wasn't going well. I needed to think of something. I needed to do something. And I needed to do it fast.

I went inside John Portifoy and had him write a note. He then waved Tupper over.

"Stall," it read. "Drag it out. We need more time."

Tupper nodded to no one in particular. He walked back over to Fennimore.

"Let's start at the beginning, Mr. Fennimore," Tupper said.

And he did. He reviewed the facts of the case in painstaking detail. (It's really disturbing how often the word *stake* makes its way into this story.)

At one point the prosecutor asked, "Is there a question in here somewhere?"

The judge was about to say something to Tupper too but then *we* put our hand over the microphone and looked at Fennimore.

"I'm going to see to it that you burn for this, Lester," the judge said so no one else could hear. "Burn to a crisp."

Fennimore squirmed a little in his chair, but that was all. I got the feeling at that point that I could have taken turns having everyone in the room accuse him and it wouldn't matter. He wasn't going to break.

It was time for Plan B. There was just one minor problem with Plan B: there was no Plan B. I had thought on it and thought on it and had come up with nothing.

It was time to improvise, to make something up. Like playing soccer. Most things you practice and you practice and you practice. These are the skills that see you through the majority of situations. But every once in a while during a game there will come a moment when you make it up. Sometimes the move works, sometimes it doesn't. This was one of those moments. And I really needed it to work. I was playing without a net. Not a goal net, a trapeze net. Okay, I'm scared of heights, so let's forget that last part.

I needed to pull a sweet Ronaldinho-like move out of thin air, out of my hat. *Hat. Hatter. Mad as. A horse. A horse. Of course. Of course*!

There had been a couple of police officers on horseback in front of the courthouse earlier. I hoped they were still there. I went outside.

There they were. The black horse seemed well suited for the occasion. I slipped inside its rider.

A few moments later the cop—still sitting on top of the horse—entered the courtroom.

The crowd gasped and the judge yelled, "What's the meaning of this?"

"Pardon the interruption, your Honor," the officer said. "But my horse has something to say."

“The hell you say,” the judge said.

An expression of confused terror gripped the cop as he now looked around the room, trying to figure out what he was doing there.

That’s when I tried one of those moves. Never having practiced it, not knowing if it would work, having no reason to think it would.

“You *bur-r-r-ned* that building,” the horse suddenly said showing its teeth and looking right at Fennimore with crazy horse eyes. “You *kil-l-l-ed* that *man-n-n-n*.”

Time stopped and all sound was sucked out of the room. And then blown back in. The horse and rider went back outside and everyone started talking at the same time in loud, frantic voices.

“That horse just spoke!”

“Did you hear what it said?”

“Horses can’t talk!”

“I know, but that one just did!”

Everyone joined in. Everyone except Fennimore. He just sat there with bulging, bloodshot eyes. The judge pounded his gavel until it broke in two. It was no use. It was, however, understandable. After all, people don’t come across a talking horse every day. I was counting on that being the case for Fennimore anyway.

The judge just sat back and let the crowd work through its delirium. Finally, exhausted from the emotions of it all, people began to settle down. The judge could once again hear himself talk.

“Would you like to take a brief recess, Mr. Fennimore?” the judge asked.

“No,” Fennimore said in a shaky voice. “I’m ready to… I’m ready to talk.”

(There seemed to be a lot of that going around.)

“Very well,” the judge said. “Mr. Tupper, please continue.”

“Do you have something to tell the court?” Tupper said, looking at the witness.

“Yes,” Fennimore stammered nervously. “What was in that letter and what that beast from Hell said are true. It *was* me. I set the fire. I’m the one you want, not Portifoy.”

The courtroom erupted again. But only for a short time. The crowd didn’t have much left.

The judge looked at Aubrey’s father.

“Mr. Portifoy, you are free to go. You have the court’s sincere apologies,” he said. “Bailiff, please take Mr. Fennimore into custody.”

Aubrey ran up to her father and threw a boa-like hug around him. She was crying and laughing at the same time. The air tasted of chocolate shake.

“Court dismissed,” somebody said.

I have no idea what I would’ve done if the giddy-up thing had not worked. But it had. That was the important thing.

It’s just a matter of time before you ask, so I’ll tell you. Well, not really. I can’t tell you whether I really made that horse speak. Let’s call it a trade secret. But if parrots can talk, why not horses? Maybe people just heard what they wanted to hear. Or perhaps it was simply an old, well-timed ventriloquist trick involving misdirection. Like when Muhammad Ali used to do that windmill motion with one arm and hit his distracted opponent with the other fist. Maybe there is hope when it comes to my card playing after all.

In any case, just believe the scenario that you're most comfortable with. That's what we do most of the time anyway.

There was a man selling hotdogs off a cart in front of the courthouse steps. I decided to try out my theory. The one that had started all this. I went inside the vendor himself and served one up with the works, extra jalapeños, hold the onions.

Oh, man. They were back. The flavors were back! I could taste food again. Life, or whatever this is, was good again. That hotdog was right. People started lining up. I just jumped from eater to eater to eater. It was epic.

The next day I went to see Aubrey.

CONCLUSION

The pressure was off. Before, whatever far-fetched, crazy-sounding story I tried to sell Aubrey mattered because it would pile on the already difficult situation with her father. She didn't need to believe that I was nuts or that she was nuts on top of that. But everything was different now.

I didn't know it at the time, but the talking horse move worked to my advantage. It made believing in ghost vampires a little more, well, believable. Aubrey was in a great mood. The world was full of light. Anything was possible. Her father was free. Horses could speak. A ghost vampire saved her father by making a horse talk? Sure. Why not? It was all good.

I wrote her the following email:

Dear Aubrey,

H here. I'm so glad things worked out with your father!

Since you seem to be in a good mood and open to the possibility that horses can talk, I thought I'd run this by you: I am a ghost. That's right, a ghost.

One of my few powers is that I can go inside people—and animals—for a few seconds at a time and control their actions. (That's how I got your dad to write this email—which by the way he won't remember writing.)

Anyway, I will be "playing" soccer at Dockery Park this Saturday at noon. It would be great if you could make it.

Your friend,

H

I finished with a few seconds to spare. I watched Aubrey read the message. She quickly got up and went to the kitchen, where her father was on his laptop.

"Dad, did you just send me an email?" she asked.

"No, I don't think so," he said and smiled. "I was just sitting here enjoying my freedom and spacing. Why?"

"Oh, nothing."

Aubrey went back to her room and stared at the computer screen for a while. I could tell she was thinking about it. She looked around the room and up toward the ceiling. She shook her head. And then she smiled.

I smiled too. This called for a trip to my favorite diner. Maybe the fat kid would be there.

The winter outdoor league had started. That's what I'm talking about! These kids were hard core. Rain. Mud. Snow. Bitter wind. It didn't matter. Most of them had two left feet—not a problem if they had been two of Messi's left feet but, alas, they weren't—and couldn't play for manure, but they had their hearts in the right place.

Saturday was cold and blue. Aubrey showed up right on time.

I went inside one of the linesmen and walked up to her.

"I'm happy you made it," I said. "I can't go back inside the same person for a while, so I'll get to play as all the players on both teams."

Aubrey was quiet for a while. She was probably thinking how this whole thing was nuts. I wanted to tell her that a day didn't go by that I didn't have the same thought.

"Sounds like fun," she said.

Both teams played great, if I do say so myself. One of the goalkeepers dribbled the ball around each member of the opposition and scored. The coach started out screaming on the play and ended up cheering like a madman. Another kid scored on a bicycle kick. Not bad for a 10-year-old. Someone else put it in directly off a corner kick. The ball sailed and curved and curled and the crowd went crazy. At halftime the ref even put on a juggling clinic.

I also went into some of the people on the sidelines so I could talk to Aubrey. And a couple of dogs went up to her too so they could get some pets. (No, they didn't speak to her.)

At the end of the game, family and friends congratulated the players.

"What got into you?" I heard one of them saying.

Exactly.

As a vampire I had never felt the need to connect with another person, except in the obvious fangs to neck manner. I also never felt the need to stand out. It was just the opposite in fact. But ever since this ghost transformation, I have had a strong desire to be noticed, to feel like I exist. At least in the eyes of one person.

Before leaving, Aubrey hugged me and gave me a kiss on the cheek. The other players started giving the kid a hard time. I felt sorry for him. He wouldn't remember how it felt.

But I would.

I still haven't told her about my vampire past. It's important that she knows about it, but I don't want to drop too much on her too fast. I'll just be a *ghost* for now. There's time. Speaking of which…

Since Fennimore pled guilty, he ended up getting life. That was fine with me. Having died three times myself, I'm not a big fan of the death penalty—even when it comes to my own murderer. Humans and vampires like to make excuses for it and justify it till the cows come home, but killing is wrong. The way I see it, Fennimore got what he deserved. Which is more than I can say for most cows, no matter what time they come home. Makes my hungry for a cheeseburger though. Cheddar, please. Extra sharp. Like my old fangs.

I still have a lot to learn about being a ghost vampire. One thing I figured out is that I still have the speed typing skills of a vampire. This frees me from being at the mercy of slow writers and allows me to write more words in the time I have. I can write more than 300 words in one sitting. (That's how I wrote this story.) Beats the old method of having to find a fast typist or that wacky letter writing relay thing.

As far as I know I haven't come across any other ghosts. Maybe someday I will. Maybe they're all around and I don't have to ability to see them. Either way, I'm fine with it. I don't need to be the only one. But if I am, I'm okay with that too.

I also don't know if my condition is permanent. I'm not holding my breath waiting to *cross over* like I'm a character on some TV show. I'm not looking to see some light either—the last time I saw a bright light it didn't end so well. I'm just here trying to figure things out and have some fun. And not always in that order.

John Portifoy used the insurance money he ended up getting to start another business. He's still selling Hawaiian shirts. But this time the focus is athletes. Aubrey and I are working on a Ronaldinho design. It's gonna be cool. Wish I could wear one. Wish I could wear one in Hawaii. Scuba diving sounds like an awfully good time.

Oh, and speaking of businesses, I've started one myself. I guess I'm something like a private eye. So private no one can see me. But that's okay because instead of people coming to me, I go to them. It was Aubrey's idea.

"I know there are other people out there who could really use your help," she said one day at the track where we go running three times a week. "You could charge extra for the talking horse. It would be a big hit at parties."

I thought about it and ended up liking the idea. (Except for the pony party part.) It would give me a chance to do some good and begin to balance out some of my darker deeds. And I have more balancing to do than a truckload of gymnasts on a balance beam.

My first "client" was that dumb poodle. The former pets of criminals aren't in big demand. Aubrey agreed to adopt it. We named it Gene. Gene as in genius.

Of course, I don't plan to charge people—or dogs—money. I have no need of it. But I will accept chocolate shakes.

Oh, *yeah*, I will. Wouldn't dream of turning one of those down.

***

About the Author

O. Penn-Coughin is the author of the *They're Coming For You: Scary Stories that Scream to be Read* series. He "lives" in Bend, Oregon with his wife, two daughters, and one crazy orange cat. Learn more at CoughinBooks.com.

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